

THE ANTICHRIST

A Brief Bible Study and Guide

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THE ANTICHRIST AND ANTICHRISTS

Connected with the Bible's teaching of the end of the world, the Judgment, and eternal life and eternal death (teachings generally falling under the term, Eschatology) is God's teaching and doctrine concerning the Antichrist. There are many warnings in the Bible concerning false teachers (e.g., Mt 7: 15-23; 16:6; Rm 16:17,18; 2 Tm 2:16-19; etc.), and the Scriptures warn that godless and false teachers will increase toward the end of the world (e.g., Mt 24:5,23,24; 2 Tm 3:1-5; 2 Pe 2 and 3; etc.).

Anyone who denies the Bible's teaching of Jesus Christ, denies that he is the incarnate Son of God, or denies this by denying his redemptive work as the Son of God and the Son of Man, is an antichrist. It is, however, in the Apostle John's first two general letters that a very clear distinction is made between antichrists and the Antichrist (the prefix 'anti' means both 'opposed to' and 'in place of').

READ: 1 John 2:18-23; 1 John 4:1-6; 2 John 7

If you compare various translations of the Bible, you will find differing opinions on the use of the definite article ('the') in these passages. In English we would use the definite article in 1 John 2:18a ("as you have heard that the Antichrist shall come") because the word Antichrist is there used as a title. In 2 John 7 we would not use the definite article before the words "deceiver" and "antichrist" because the use of the article in Greek is generic (as evidenced from the first part of the verse).

1-23-78 - Pastor Carl d. Johnson - H.P.

It is important to note especially two things in these passages of Scripture. First, John points out distinctly that there are many antichrists who "have come" (1 Jn 2:18; 2 Jn 7) and consistently uses the plural or the term "every" with regard to these antichrists (1 Jn 2:18,19; 4:1,2; 2 Jn 7), and that there is the Antichrist who "is coming" (1 Jn 2:18). Secondly, John reminds us that the spirit of the Antichrist is the same as the spirit of all antichrists (1 Jn 4:1-3) - it is the spirit (attitude or principle) of falsehood (1 Jn 4:6) which is opposed to that of the Gospel truth (1 Jn 4:6) and which denies the foundation of the saving Gospel (1 Jn 2:22,23; 4:2,3; 2 Jn 7 - Mt 16:15-18).

SUMMARY: The Bible teaches that many false teachers will come (especially toward the end of the world), claiming to teach the saving Gospel of Christ. They are to be recognized by their fruits (Mt 7:15-20): whether or not they directly or indirectly deny the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who put on flesh to redeem us from our sins by being our perfect substitute and sacrifice. Among these many antichrists will come one who is preeminently called the Antichrist, the archantichrist, who stands out above all the others.

THE ANTICHRIST = THE MAN OF LAWLESSNESS

The Apostle John writes, "you have heard" that the Antichrist is coming (1 Jn 2:18), and, "you have heard" that the spirit of the Antichrist is coming and that the spirit of the Antichrist is already now in the world (1 Jn 4:3). In 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, the

Apostle Paul speaks of the man of lawlessness, an archenemy of Christ, who is coming, but whose spirit or attitude or principle of lawlessness is already at work (2 Th 2:3,4,7). He reminds his readers: "I used to tell you these things," (2 Th 2:5). He calls this man of lawlessness "the antikeimenos", the one who opposes God and professes to take his place.

Just as John ascribes the evil of all false teachers (antichrists) to the very same spirit as that of the Antichrist (1 Jn 4:3), so Paul ascribes to the man of lawlessness the very sum and substance of such lying evil (2 Th 2:9,10). Just as John connects the Antichrist's future coming to the end of the world (1 Jn 2:18), so Paul reminds and comforts the Thessalonians that they could not have missed Jesus' Second Coming (one of the false teachings that was endangering them at the time) because the man of lawlessness had not yet been revealed (2 Th 2:1-3).

Just as John reminds us that the only way to be kept safe from the Antichrist (as well as all antichrists) is by knowing the truth (1 Jn 2:20), keeping the truth we have heard from the beginning (1 Jn 2:24), and recognizing the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 Jn 4:6); so Paul reminds us that the only way not to be deceived by the man of lawlessness is by loving the Gospel truth (2 Th 2:10,12).

SUMMARY: The Antichrist and the man of lawlessness are identical.

THE FINGERPRINTS OF THE ANTICHRIST

The Apostle John distinguishes between the Antichrist and every antichrist, reminding us to be careful and to shun all false teachers and teachings, since they have the same spirit of falsehood as the Antichrist. The Apostle Paul, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12, identifies the Antichrist by detailing his characteristics and marks. He gives his fingerprints, so to speak, so that we may recognize him and not be numbered among those deceived by this archantichrist.

READ: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-17

1. Verse 3. The Antichrist, who is doomed to destruction, causes a rebellion, apostasy, falling away. That rebellion will reveal him to be who he is for all who love the truth to recognize, just as Jesus' Second Coming will reveal him to be the Christ (to the joy of those who now believe, to the terror of those who now disbelieve). The rebellion or apostasy is one against and from the Gospel truth (vv. 10,12).

2. Verse 4. The Antichrist exalts himself above all that is called God or that is to be worshiped or revered, i.e., he usurps divine authority (Ps 82:6 - Jn 10:34,35) in government, home, and especially in the Church - the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19-22). He is to be found where the Gospel, the mark of the Church, is found. (Note that he is called the mystery of lawlessness).

(6)

3. Verse 4. The Antichrist claims authority which God alone has, makes himself out to be God.

4. Verse 7. The mystery of the Antichrist was already at work at the time of the apostles (note 1 Jn 4:3, speaking of the spirit of the Antichrist!).

5. Verses 6,7. The Antichrist is to be revealed at God's right time for him in conjunction with the great apostasy (v. 3). What would cease to restrain him is the something (v. 6)/someone (v. 7) that "you know", namely, the love of the Gospel truth (vv. 10, 12).

6. Verse 8. Connected also with his being revealed is the prophecy that the Antichrist will be done away with or overthrown by the spirit or breath of the Lord's mouth - that is, the Lord's Word (Is 11:4; Eph 4:17 - Re 1:16).

7. Verse 8. The Antichrist will be destroyed or put out of commission at and by Christ's visible and glorious Second Coming.

8. Verse 9. The Antichrist's coming (being revealed) is with the operation of Satan himself - with every kind of lying and deceitful miracle, sign, and wonder (the same three words used to describe Jesus' miracles).

9. Verse 10. The Antichrist deceives those who are perishing with every kind of wicked deception.

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10. Verses 10-12. The Antichrist's effectiveness is a judgment of God on those who do not love the Gospel truth but rather delight in wickedness. Just as God sent forth a lying spirit in the mouth of the false prophets to persuade the rebellious and hard-hearted Ahab to commit folly (1 Kgs 22), so God sends the working of error in the spirit of the Antichrist (as well as all antichrists) so that those who despise God's grace in his Gospel truth should be hardened in believing the great lie of work-righteousness and be condemned.

SUMMARY: LET THE READER BEWARE, AND PRAISE AND THANK GOD FOR REVEALING THIS TEACHING TO US!

THE POPE IS THE VERY ANTICHRIST

Although the Scripture's teaching of the Antichrist is a non-fundamental doctrine of the Bible (it does not belong to the foundation or object of faith in so far as saving faith obtains the forgiveness of sins and makes men children of God), it is nevertheless an article of faith, a doctrine of God. It is the height of folly to ignore this teaching (as well as any of God's teachings), since it is given us for our warning and comfort. It warns and alerts us against the Antichrist's deceptiveness so that we are not numbered among the deceived and condemned. It comforts us with the assurance of the victory of Christ and his Gospel of salvation. Indeed, it is blasphemy to despise or ignore any of God's teachings.

Since Scripture gives us the fingerprints of the Antichrist that we might recognize and beware of him (and also join in his overthrow by loving and proclaiming the pure Gospel truth - the breath of the Lord's mouth), it is Scripture which reveals the Pope to be the very Antichrist because the Pope's fingers match the prints given by God himself.

The following paragraphs correspond to the similarly numbered paragraphs in the previous section.

1. The very heart of the Gospel truth is that man is justified and saved only by faith in Christ Jesus, without doing the works commanded by the law (Rm 3:28). As more and more false teachings gained prominence in the history of the papacy, there was promoted the idea of synergism (the teaching that man's will cooperates with God in regeneration, and thus salvation). The subtle and damning character of this popish teaching was grossly stated in three of the canons (rules or laws) of the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent, a council of the Roman Catholic Church called by the Pope and lasting from 1545 to 1563. To anathematize means to curse with excommunication, with the resulting meaning of damning.

Canon XI. "If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favor of God; let him be anathema."

(NOTE: It must be kept in mind what the Roman Catholic Church means by grace. The term grace in Roman Catholicism is not God's undeserved love and mercy for sinners, it is rather a medicine. Denying the Scripture's teaching of original sin, Catholicism claims that everyone has the natural power (bonus motus - good attitude) to desire God and desire to do his will. When this bonus motus is exercised on the part of the individual, God confers the reward of the first grace (Catholic justification) which enables the individual to do good works. When the individual then combines the exercise of his bonus motus with the first grace infused in him and accomplishes good works, God confers on him the reward of the second grace (Catholic salvation). Note the misuse of Scripture's terms: grace, justification, salvation. Note also the synergism.)

Canon XII. "If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be anathema."

Canon XX. "If any one saith, that the man who is justified and how perfect soever, is not bound to observe the commandments of God and of the Church, but only to believe; as if indeed the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life, without the condition of observing the commandments: let him be anathema."

2. The more thorough one's knowledge of the history and the teaching of the papacy;

the more remarkable the fulfillment of this prophecy seems. The Pope's claims of jurisdiction in areas of authority such as government and the family are no longer as gross and obvious as in previous centuries - but they remain nevertheless. Of the two we will treat his claim of authority in government.

In the Middle Ages the Pope crowned kings. At the time of Pope Leo XIII (ruled from 1878 to 1903), the papacy's assertion of jurisdiction over government found the following expression: "It is not lawful for the state, any more than for the individual, to hold in equal favor different kinds of religion: that the unrestrained freedom of thinking and of openly making known one's thoughts is not inherent in the rights of citizens, and is by no means to be reckoned worthy of favor and supported."

In Vatican Council II (1963-1965) the Pope admits the content of the right of religious freedom equally to all churches as to the Roman Catholic Church. With regard to the foundation of the right, the Pope nevertheless still draws a sharp distinction: the Catholic Church claims to possess this right in all its fulness for itself alone on the basis of the divine mandate supposedly laid upon it by Christ himself. (Remember that the Pope claims the Roman Catholic Church to be the one Holy Christian Church on earth. Whenever the Pope speaks about 'the Church', he means the Roman Catholic Church.)

The Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom says: "Among other things which concern the good of the Church and indeed the welfare of society here on earth - things therefore which

are always to be kept secure and defended against all injury - this certainly is preeminent, namely, that the Church should enjoy that full measure of freedom which her care for the salvation of men requires. This freedom is sacred, because the only-begotten Son endowed with it the Church which he purchased with His blood. It is so much a property of the Church that to act against it is to act against the will of God. The freedom of the Church is the fundamental principle in what concerns the relations between the Church and governments and the whole civil order."

The Pope's claim of absolute authority in the Holy Christian Church - a complete jurisdiction over Christians - is evident from the following quotations from Vatican Council I (1870). (Note that Vatican Council II reaffirms the teaching of Vatican Council I.)

Vatican Council I, Chapter I (anathema). "If anyone, therefore, shall say that Blessed Peter the Apostle was not appointed the Prince of all the Apostles and the visible Head of the whole Church Militant; or that the same directly and immediately received from the same Our Lord Jesus Christ a primacy of honor only, and not of true and proper jurisdiction; let him be anathema."

Chapter II (anathema). "If, then, any should deny that it is by the institution of Christ the Lord, or by divine right, that Blessed Peter should have a perpetual line of successors in the Primacy over the Universal Church, or that the Roman Pontiff is the successor of Blessed Peter in this primacy; let him be anathema."

Chapter III (anathema). "If then any shall say that the Roman Pontiff has the office merely of inspection or direction, and not full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the Universal Church, not only in things which belong to faith and morals, but also in those which relate to the discipline and government of the Church spread throughout the world; or assert that he possesses merely the principle part, and not all the fulness of this supreme power; or that this power which he enjoys is not ordinary and immediate, both over each and all the Churches and over each and all the Pastors and the faithful; let him be anathema."

Chapter IV (definition and anathema). "We (referring to the Pope) teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed; that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra, that is, when in discharge of the office of Pastor and Doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the Universal Church, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed that His Church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals; and that therefore such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church. But if anyone - which may God avert - presume to contradict this Our definition; let him be anathema."

3. The following quotations clearly show the Pope's claim on authority which God reserves only for himself (as already evidenced above) and that he makes himself out to be

God. (Remember that our God and Lord Jesus Christ is the only Head of the Holy Christian Church - Eph 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:19.)

From Unam Sanctam, decree of Pope Boniface VIII in 1302. "We are compelled to believe and hold the one Holy Catholic and itself apostolic church with urgent faith ... outside of which there is neither salvation nor remission of sins ... Moreover, we declare that every human creature is to be subject to the Roman Pontiff, we say, we define and pronounce, to be altogether necessary for salvation."

From Vatican Council II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. "Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or to remain in her could not be saved. They are fully incorporated into the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and through union with her visible structure are joined to Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops."

This Dogmatic Constitution on the Church goes on to contend that among those who are not Roman Catholic there are people who can attain everlasting salvation: those who are honored with the name Christian and show a true religious zeal; those who acknowledge the Creator (but not Jesus Christ); those who "through no fault of their own" do not know the Gospel or the Roman Catholic Church but nevertheless sincerely seek God and strive to do his will as it is known to them. Instead of calling these people sons of the Church, it numbers

them among the "people of God". Yet it identifies the "people of God" with the "Mother Church". They are linked to the Mother Church by salutary bonds. Vatican Council II has not diminished the claim in Unam Sanctam; it has merely made it seem more palatable.

The above is clearer when reading a portion of Vatican Council II's Decree on Ecumenism. "It is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fulness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who already belong in any way to God's People."

From the Creed of the Council of Trent (1564):

"I acknowledge the holy, Catholic, and apostolic Roman Church as the mother and teacher of all churches; and I promise and swear true obedience to the Roman Pontiff, vicar of Christ and successor of Blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles."

From Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. "Continuing in the same task of clarification begun by Vatican I, this Council has decided to declare and proclaim before all men its teaching concerning bishops, the successors of the apostles, who together with the successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ and the visible Head of the whole Church, govern the house of the living God."

4. The spirit of the Antichrist was already at work in the apostles' time: supplanting human authority for God's authority among believers. Examples given in the Scriptures range from the 'super apostles' of 2 Corinthians and the 'Judaizers' of Galatians to Diotrefes in 3 John. Church history shows that in post-apostolic times the struggle for pre-eminence of jurisdiction among the various bishops finally resulted in the bishop of Rome claiming full and absolute jurisdiction for himself. Note how Jesus forbids any idea of jurisdiction (other than that of the Word) among his believers - Lk 22:24-27; Mt 23:8-12 (note that the word 'pope' means 'father').

The Pope's claim of jurisdiction finds no basis in Matthew 16:13-19: "this rock" (petra) is obviously not Peter (petros), but rather the proclamation of Christ's person and work (v. 16) - 1 Cor 3:11; Eph 2:20. The authority of the Gospel was given equally to all believers - Mt 18:15-20; Jn 20:22,23; 1 Pe 2:9, 10.

5. God is in control. He permits the Antichrist to deceive as an act of judgment on those who neither love nor believe the truth of the Gospel of Jesus. The Antichrist is revealed through the apostasy he promulgates, just as Christ will be revealed when he comes on Judgment Day to banish all apostates to hell.

As the love of God's truth diminished among many in the early Christian Church, the Roman bishop's claims to preeminent and absolute authority by means of a supposed succession from Peter were believed more and more. Stephen I,

bishop of Rome from 253 to 257, was the first, according to recorded history, to claim such jurisdiction as Peter's successor. Leo I, bishop of Rome from 440 to 461, was able to consolidate his power and be revered as the one who spoke and dealt with Peter's (and so, Christ's) authority by almost all churches except the eastern ones.

Around the year 860, the Archbishops of Trier and Cologne intimated that the Roman Pope was the Antichrist. In 991 at the Synod of Rheims, Bishop Arnulf called the Pope the Antichrist. It is reported by Aventinus that at the time of Pope Gregory VII (ruled from 1073 to 1085) all pious and humble hearts had admitted that the rule of the Antichrist had begun. Other Roman Catholics who had identified the Pope as the Antichrist include Abbot Joachim (c. 1200) and Eberhard of Salzburg in 1240.

Among non-Catholics who recognized the revelation of the Antichrist in the Pope were the Waldenses (excepting those of Italy) beginning in the 12th century, Milicz of Prague (1350), John Wycliffe (1380), and many of the followers of John Huss (died 1415).

See the Lutheran Confessions in the Concordia Triglotta: the Smalcald Articles, p. 474, par. 10-14; Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope, p. 514, par. 39-41. See also the Statement on the Antichrist adopted by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod without a dissenting vote at its 1959 convention, reading in part: "Therefore on the basis of a renewed study of the pertinent Scriptures we reaffirm the statement of the Lutheran Confessions that 'the

Pope is the very Antichrist.'" .

6. Error can be fought only with truth. The proclamation of the truth of the Gospel at the time of the Lutheran Reformation (sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura) was particularly destructive of the Pope's power and saved many souls from the great apostasy caused by him. The Antichrist can be taken out of people's hearts only by the power of the Gospel which is the Spirit's means for creating and sustaining the love of the truth. Christ continues to overthrow the Antichrist with the breath of his mouth through us - as long as we continue to fight the mystery of lawlessness with the mystery of the Gospel (Eph 6:19).

7. The Antichrist will, however, be completely destroyed (or put out of commission) only at Christ's visible and glorious Second Coming. It is estimated that at the time of the Lutheran Reformation the entire population of the world numbered less than 470 million. Today there are approximately 600 million Roman Catholics living in the world. It is rather striking that, despite the severe setback of the Antichrist's power at the time of the Reformation, his power is (although not as comprehensively) over more souls today. The Pope continues to sit in the temple of God, making himself out to be God, causing a continuing apostasy. Think how many little Catholic children, brought to saving faith in Holy Baptism, fall from faith and lose eternal salvation thanks to the Pope and his teachings! He will continue to do his work until Christ's Second Coming, when his work will come to an abrupt halt and his des-

tration will be accomplished by Jesus Christ (Re 19:11-21).

8. The miracles, signs, and wonders of the Antichrist are lying and deceitful in that their purpose is to lead people from the Gospel truth (compare the purpose of the miracles, signs, and wonders done by the Apostles - He 2:3,4). Although many of the miracles, signs, and wonders claimed by the Roman Catholic Church may well be hoaxes, certainly they cannot all be proven as such. The bleeding statues, miracle-associated relics and images of Mary and the saints, stigmata, shrouds, healings associated with places where Mary is said to have appeared, etc. draw many people to subordinate themselves to the Pope and confirm many people in their false beliefs. One can hardly deny that with God's permission Satan's work is promulgated through the Pope by the use of miracles, signs, and wonders which would have people believe that the Pope speaks for God just as God witnessed to the truth by answering Elijah's prayer (compare 1 Kgs 18:17-40 and Re 13:11-14).

9. The Pope deceives many who are perishing (who are destined for hell if they continue to despise the Gospel truth). He deceives them with every kind of wicked deception. The worst kind of deception is that he at one and the same time proclaims Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man, as the crucified and risen Savior of the world, and then on the other hand leads people to believe that they must contribute to their salvation by doing the deeds of the law and by being subject to the Pope. His wicked deceptions include all of his false teachings: from his

claimed jurisdiction over all Christendom and his making himself out to be God to the idolatry of the Mass and his so-called sacrament of penance.

He is indeed the mystery of lawlessness since he, as the generally recognized leader of the greatest portion of nominal Christendom, teaches people the way to hell while proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus. The Apostle Paul uses the word "mystery" twenty-one times in his letters: twenty times with reference to godliness and the Gospel, and once with reference to the Antichrist. Because of God's gracious promise in Isaiah 55:10,11 we know that there are some true believers within the Roman Catholic Church: souls which before God trust solely in Jesus and his merits for their salvation. But those souls are in great danger of losing that saving faith because of the Pope's deceptions.

10. The Pope and his rule over the hearts of those who were received into the kingdom of God through Baptism as infants by faith in Christ is a judgment of God against all who do not believe the truth but love the wickedness of rebellion against God instead. Any time we place our reason or our Old Adam's desires above God's revealed Word and the Gospel of Jesus we tempt God to delude us with error as an act of judgment. The Pope's aim is still to bring all peoples in subjection to himself under the guise of doing God's work. His real service is to godlessness. May God preserve us faithful by hallowing his name among us and may he always comfort us with the knowledge of the effectiveness of the pure Word against the man of lawlessness.

SUMMARY: The Pope is the Antichrist, whom we are to resist with the pure Gospel of Jesus.

COMMON OBJECTIONS TO THIS DOCTRINE OF GOD

Some say that the Antichrist must be a political oppressor since a rebellion is spoken of. Note that Paul speaks of a spiritual tyranny (v. 4) and also a spiritual apostasy (vv. 3,10-12).

Some say that the Antichrist must be a single individual (as opposed to a succession of Popes in the papacy) because Paul speaks of him in the singular (vv. 3,4,8). Note that the Apostle speaks of secret beginnings in his own day and yet places his being put out of commission at the end of the world; that he speaks of the power which at first restrains the Antichrist both in the neuter gender (v. 6) and in the masculine gender (v. 7) as an individual - and that restrainer is the Gospel truth (vv. 10,12); that both that man of lawlessness and the one who restrains are clearly to be understood as collective nouns.

Some say that the Pope cannot be the Antichrist because some Popes were pious men. Note that he is called the mystery of lawlessness; that he obviously will seem pious since he makes himself out to be God; that the Apostle calls special attention to his deceptiveness; and finally that no one can be pious who condemns those who believe that by the grace of God alone man is justified solely by faith in Christ Jesus without doing the deeds of the law.

Some say that to call the Pope the Anti-christ is a historical judgment and not an article of faith, since the Scriptures do not mention the Pope by name. Note that the fulfillment of prophecy is not a historical judgment but as sure and certain a truth as God's prophecy itself. All of Scripture's prophecies are given so that their fulfillment is evident to the eyes of faith. Only time separates prophecy from fulfillment. The fulfillment of every prophecy is the same article of faith as the prophecy. The prophecies about the Anti-christ find their fulfillment in the papacy; therefore it is an article of faith to be held before God and the Church that the Pope is the very Antichrist.

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