

M E R I D I A N

C R O S S I N G A E S T H E T I C S

*Giorgio Agamben*

TRANSLATED BY ADAM KOTSKO

# THE MYSTERY OF EVIL

*Benedict XVI and the End of Days*



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M E R I D I A N

*Crossing Aesthetics*

Werner Hamacher

*Editor*

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*Benedict XVI and the End of Days*

Giorgio Agamben

*Translated by Adam Kotsko*

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## *Translator's Note*

For this text, I have broken with a long-established tradition in Agamben translations by declining to mark the distinction between two pairs of terms: *diritto/legge* and *potere/potenza* (conventionally translated as juridical order/law and power/potential, respectively). In neither of these texts is Agamben exploring the conceptual problems that motivated the technical usage of these pairs, and hence translating them in the conventional way struck me as unidiomatic and distracting. Nevertheless, Agamben's usage of the respective pairs is systematic within this text and can be tracked fairly easily based on the sense. *Diritto* appears exclusively in "The Mystery of the Church" and always refers to "law in general" (for instance, *diritto naturale e diritto positivo* is translated as "natural law and positive law" rather than "natural juridical order and positive juridical order"), and every use of

“law” in the context of the exposition of the biblical text corresponds to *legge*; *potere* refers to political power in an abstract sense (e.g., constitutional powers or state powers), while *potenza* refers to concrete political “powers” in the sense of visible institutions (the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, etc.). The only exception to the latter rule comes in Agamben’s rendering of 2 Thessalonians 2:9, where Satan is said to use “all power” (*ogni potenza*).

For Greek terms, I have supplied macrons, which do not appear in Agamben’s Italian text. The lack of macrons sometimes creates ambiguity as to whether we are dealing with the *katechōn* (the personal form: “the one who restrains”) or the *katechon* (the impersonal form: “what restrains”), and I have opted to add or omit the macron depending on what seemed to me to be the more likely sense in any given case. Finally, I regret that there was no possible translation for the subtitle of the second essay that did not introduce a rhyme that does not exist in the Italian.

I would like to thank Carlo Salzani for checking my translation against the Italian text and to extend my continued gratitude to Emily-Jane Cohen and the entire staff of Stanford University Press.

## *Prefatory Note*

*“Mysterium iniquitatis”* represents the unpublished text of a lecture delivered at Freiberg, Switzerland, on November 13, 2012, on the occasion of an awarding of an honorary doctorate in theology. The arguments treated on that occasion are so tightly interconnected with the following attempt at an interpretation of Benedict XVI’s abdication (“The Mystery of the Church”) that I did not believe it necessary to conceal the proximity by mitigating assonances and repetitions. Both texts in fact think one single problem: that of the political meaning of the messianic theme of the end of days, today as much as twenty centuries ago.

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# I. The Mystery of the Church

## I.

In these pages I will seek to understand Pope Benedict XVI's decision by situating it in the theological and ecclesiastical context proper to it. And yet I will consider this decision in its exemplarity, which is to say, because of the consequences that it is possible to draw from it for an analysis of the political situation of the democracies in which we live.

Indeed, I am convinced that in carrying out the "great refusal," Benedict XVI has given proof not of cowardice—as, according to an exegetical tradition that is far from reliable, Dante wrote of Celestine V—but of a courage that today takes on an exemplary sense and value. The reasons invoked by the pontiff to justify his decision, certainly true in part, cannot in any way account for a gesture that has an entirely unique meaning in the history of Church. And this

gesture acquires its full weight if one remembers that on April 28, 2009, Benedict XVI had laid down, precisely on the tomb of Celestine V in Sulmona, the pallium that he had received at the moment of his investiture, proving that the decision had been thoroughly considered beforehand. Celestine V had justified his abdication with almost the same words as Benedict XVI, speaking of “weakness of body” (*debilitas corporis*; Benedict XVI invoked a diminution of “strength of body,” *vigor corporis*) and of “personal infirmity” (*infirmitas personae*); but already the early sources inform us that the true reason was to be sought in his indignation “at the barratries and simonies of the court.”

Why does this decision appear so exemplary to us today? Because it forcefully calls attention to the distinction between two essential principles of our ethico-political tradition, of which our societies seem to have lost all awareness: legitimacy and legality. If the crisis that our society is going through is so profound and serious, it is because it does not call into question only the *legality* of institutions, but also their *legitimacy*; not only, as is repeated too often, the rules and modalities of the exercise of power, but the very principle that founds and legitimates it.

Powers and institutions are not delegitimated today because they have fallen into illegality; rather the

contrary is true, namely that illegality is so diffuse and generalized because the powers have lost all awareness of their legitimacy. For this reason it is futile to believe that we can confront the crisis of our societies through the action—which is certainly necessary—of the judiciary power: a crisis that affects legitimacy cannot be resolved solely on the level of law. The hypertrophy of law, which presumes to legislate over everything, on the contrary betrays, through an excess of formal legality, the loss of all substantial legitimacy. Modernity's attempt to make legality and legitimacy coincide, by seeking to secure through positive law the legitimacy of a power, is completely inadequate, as is clear from the inexorable process of decline into which our democratic institutions have entered. A society's institutions remain living only if both principles (which in our tradition have also received the name of natural law and positive law, spiritual power and temporal power, or in Rome, *auctoritas* and *potestas*) remain present and act in them without ever claiming to coincide.

2.

Whenever the distinction between legitimacy and legality is evoked, it is necessary to specify that one does not mean by this, according to a tradition that



defines so-called reactionary thought, that legitimacy is a hierarchically superior substantial principle, of which juridico-political legality would be only an epiphenomenon or effect. We mean rather that legitimacy and legality are the two parts of one single political machine, which not only must never be flattened out into one another, but must also remain in some way operative so that the machine can function. If the Church lays claim to a spiritual power to which the temporal power of the Empire or the State must remain subordinate, as happened in medieval Europe, or if, as happened in the twentieth-century totalitarian State, legitimacy insists on doing without legality, then the political machine spins in circles with often lethal results; if, on the other hand, as has happened in modern democracies, the legitimating principle of popular sovereignty is reduced to the electoral moment and is dissolved into procedural rules that are juridically fixed in advance, legitimacy runs the risk of disappearing into legality and the political machine is equally paralyzed.

This is why Benedict XVI's gesture appears so important to us. This man, who was at the head of the institution that claims the most ancient and pregnant title of legitimacy, has called into question the very sense of this title with his gesture. In the face of a curia that, completely oblivious to its own legiti-

macy, stubbornly pursues the motives of economy and temporal power, Benedict XVI has chosen to use only spiritual power, in the only way that seemed possible to him, namely by renouncing the exercise of the vicarship of Christ. In this way, the Church itself has been called into question to its very root.

3.

A deeper understanding of Benedict XVI's gesture demands that it be restored to the theological context that alone allows one to fully appreciate its meaning, and in particular to the pope's own conception of the Church. In 1956 the thirty-year-old theologian Joseph Ratzinger published an article in *Revue des études augustiniennes* with the title "Reflections on Tyconius's Concept of the Church in the *Liber regularum*."

Tyconius, active in Africa in the second half of the fourth century and usually classified as a Donatist heretic, is in reality an extraordinary theologian, without whom Augustine could never have written his masterpiece, *The City of God*. His *Liber regularum* (*The Book of Rules*; the only work of his preserved, along with fragments of a *Commentary on the Apocalypse*) in fact contains, in the form of a series of seven rules for the interpretation of the Scriptures, a true and proper treatise on ecclesiology.

The second rule, which bears the title *De Domini corpore bipartito* (“The Lord’s Bipartite Body”) and has its equivalent in the seventh rule, *De diabolo et eius corpore* (“The Devil and His Body”), is the one which the young Ratzinger focuses his attention on. “The essential content of the doctrine of the *corpus bipartitum* [bipartite body],” he writes, “consists in the thesis that the body of the Church has two sides or aspects: one ‘left’ and one ‘right,’ one guilty and one blessed, which nevertheless constitute one single body. Even more forcefully than in the duality of the sons of Abraham and of Jacob, Tyconius finds this thesis expressed in those passages of the Scriptures in which, not only the two aspects, but also their cohesion in one single body is made visible: *fusca sum et decora*, says the bride of the Song of Songs (1:4), ‘I am dark *and* beautiful,’ which is to say: the one bride of Christ, whose body is that of the Church, has a ‘left’ *and* a ‘right’ side; it includes within itself both sin *and* grace” (Ratzinger I, pp. 179–80; emphasis in original).

Ratzinger emphasizes the difference between this thesis and Augustine’s, who nonetheless has clearly drawn inspiration from it for his idea of a Church *permixta* of good and evil. “(In Tyconius) there is not that clear antithesis of Jerusalem and Babylon, which is so characteristic of Augustine. Jerusalem is at the same time Babylon, it includes it in itself. Both constitute

one sole city, which has a ‘right’ and a ‘left’ side. Tyconius did not develop, like Augustine, a doctrine of the two cities, but that of *one* city with two sides” (ibid., pp. 180–81; emphasis in original).

The consequence of this radical thesis, which divides and at the same time unites a Church of the wicked and a Church of the just, is, according to Ratzinger, that the Church is, until the Last Judgment, both Church of Christ and Church of the Antichrist: “From this it follows that the Antichrist belongs to the Church, grows in it and with it up to the great *discessio* [separation], which will be introduced by the definitive *revelatio*” (ibid., p. 181).

#### 4.

It is worth reflecting on this last point to understand the implications of Tyconius’s reading of the conception—in both the young Freising theologian and the future pope—of the essence and destiny of the Church. As we have seen, Tyconius distinguishes a dark (*fusca*) Church, made up of the wicked who form the body of Satan, and a just (*decora*) Church, made up of those who are faithful to Christ. In the present state, the Church’s two bodies are inseparably mixed, but they will be divided at the end of days: “Now this goes on from the time of the Lord’s passion until the

church, which keeps it in check, withdraws from the midst of this mystery of lawlessness [*mysterium facinoris*] so that godlessness may be unveiled in its own time, as the apostle says” (Tyconius, p. 74/123).

The Scripture text that Tyconius cites (“as the Apostle says”) is the same one that Ratzinger alludes to in speaking of a “great *discessio*”: it is the famous and obscure passage of the Second Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, which contains a prophecy on the end of days. I provide it here in a translation that is as faithful as possible:

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by inspiration or by word or by a letter that claims to be sent by me, as though the day of the Lord were imminent. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the apostasy comes and the man of lawlessness [*ho anthropos tēs anomias*] is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know what is now restraining [*to katechon*] him, so that he may be revealed when the time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness [*mystērion tēs anomias*, which the Vulgate translates as *mysterium iniquitatis*; in the translation that Tyconius makes use of, *mysterium facinoris*] is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains [*ho katechōn*] it is removed. And

then the lawless one [*anomos*, literally “the without-law”] will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will eliminate with the breath of his mouth, rendering him inoperative with the manifestation of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (2 Thessalonians 2:1–11)

5.

The passage concerns the end of days, whose coming is linked to the action of two characters, “the man of lawlessness” (or the “outlaw,” *anomos*) and “what [or the one who] restrains,” that is, delays the coming of Christ and the end of the world. Although Paul does not seem to be familiar with the term Antichrist, beginning with Irenaeus (and then, unanimously, in Hippolytus, Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine), the first character has been identified with the Antichrist from the First Epistle of John. The *katechōn*, who restrains the end, has by contrast been identified by the Fathers with two opposed powers: the Roman Empire and the Church itself. The first interpretation goes back to Jerome, according to whom the Apostle had not wanted to openly name the Empire, in order to avoid being accused of desiring its collapse. The second interpretation, as we have seen, goes back precisely

to Tyconius, who had identified the Church (or better, a part of it, the *fusca* Church) with the Antichrist. In Book XX of *The City of God*, Augustine discretely suggests this without naming him: "But others think that [the Apostle's] words . . . refer only to the wicked and the hypocrites who are in the Church, until they reach a number so great as to furnish Antichrist with a great people, and that this is the mystery of iniquity, because it seems hidden. . . . [And] they suppose that it is to this same mystery John alludes to in his epistle. . . . As therefore there went out from the Church many heretics, whom John calls 'many antichrists,' at that time prior to the end, and which John calls 'the last time,' so in the end they shall go out who do not belong to Christ, but to that last Antichrist, and then he shall be revealed" (Augustine, XX, 19).

Tyconius therefore knows of an eschatological time in which the separation of the two Churches and of the two groups of people will be accomplished; already at the end of the fourth century, then, there existed a school of thought that saw in the Roman Church, more precisely in the bipartite character of its body, the cause of the delay of the parousia.

## 6.

The first hypothesis, which identified the power that restrains with the Roman Empire, was vindicated

in the twentieth century by a great Catholic jurist, Carl Schmitt, who saw in the doctrine of the *katechon* the only possibility of conceiving history from a Christian point of view: "The belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world," he writes, "provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire of the Germanic kings" (Schmitt, p. 60). As for the second hypothesis, it has been taken up again in our time by a brilliant theologian who is underappreciated by the Church, Ivan Illich. According to Illich the *mysterium iniquitatis* of which the Apostle speaks is none other than the *corruptio optimi pessima* (the worst corruption of the best), namely the perversion of the Church that, by institutionalizing itself more and more as an alleged *societas perfecta*, has furnished the modern State with the model for completely taking charge of humanity.

But, even earlier, the doctrine of the Roman Church as *katechon* had found its most extreme expression in the legend of the Grand Inquisitor, which Ivan Karamazov recounts in Dostoevsky's novel. Here the Church is not only the power that delays Christ's second coming, but that which seeks to definitively exclude it ("Go and do not come again," the Grand Inquisitor says to Christ; Dostoevsky, p. 262).



7.

In the general audience of April 22, 2009, two months before laying his pallium on the tomb of Celestine V, Benedict XVI again evoked the figure of Tyconius in connection with the way in which we must understand “the mystery of the Church” today. Speaking about Ambrose Autpert, an eighth-century theologian and author of a commentary on the Apocalypse which had been inspired by that of Tyconius, he writes, “In his commentary he sees the Apocalypse above all as a reflection of the mystery of the Church. Tyconius had reached the conviction that the Church was a bipartite body: on the one hand, he says, she belongs to Christ, but there is another part of the Church that belongs to the devil” (Ratzinger 2). That the thesis of Tyconius, designated as a “great theologian,” now received the sanction of the Bishop of Rome, is certainly not a matter of indifference. And what is in question is not only the thesis of the bipartite body of the Church: what is also and above all in question are the eschatological implications, which is to say, the “great *discessio*,” the great separation between the wicked and the faithful—between the Church as body of the Antichrist and the Church as body of Christ—which must happen at the end of days.

Let us therefore attempt to situate the pontiff's decision in this theological context, to which it indisputably belongs. The abdication cannot fail to evoke from this perspective something like a *discessio*, a separation of the *decora* Church from the *fusca* Church; and yet Benedict XVI knows that this can and must happen only at the moment of Christ's second coming, which is precisely what the bipartition of the Church's body, acting as *katechon*, seems destined to delay.

8.

Here everything hangs on how one interprets the eschatological theme that is inseparable from the Christian philosophy of history (but perhaps every philosophy of history is constitutively Christian), and in particular on the sense that one attributes to the passage from the Pauline epistle. It is well known, as Troeltsch once observed, that the Church closed its eschatological office some time ago (Troeltsch, p. 36); but precisely Benedict XVI's decision shows that the problem of the last things continues to act subterraneously in the Church's history. In fact, eschatology does not necessarily mean—as Schmitt suggests—a paralysis of historical events, in the sense that the end of days would render every action useless. Just the opposite, it is an integral part of the sense of last things that they

should guide and orient action in penultimate things. Paul, who always refers to messianic time with the expression *ho nyn kairos*, the “now-time,” never stops reminding us of this, admonishing the Thessalonians not to be disturbed by the immanence of the parousia. What interests the Apostle is not the last day, it is not the *end of time*, but the *time of the end*, the internal transformation of time that the messianic event has produced once and for all, and the consequent transformation of the life of the faithful. The *mysterium iniquitatis* of the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians is not a supratemporal enigma, whose sole sense is that of putting an end to the history and economy of salvation: it is a historical drama (*mystērion* in Greek means “dramatic action”), which is underway in every instant, so to speak, and in which the destiny of humanity, the salvation or fall of human beings, is always at stake. And one of the theses of Tyconius’s *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, which Benedict XVI knows very well, was precisely that the prophecies of the Apocalypse do not refer to the end of days, but to the condition of the Church in the interval between the first and second coming, which is to say in the historical time which we are still living out.

9.

This means, in the case of the separation between the two aspects of the Church's body, that the "great *discessio*" of which the young Ratzinger spoke is not only a future event that, as such, must be separated from the present and isolated in the end of days: it is, rather, something that must orient *here and now* the conduct of every Christian and, in the first place, that of the pontiff. Contrary to Schmitt's thesis, the *katechon*, the "power that holds back"—whether it is identified with the Church or with the State—can neither inspire nor defer in any way the historical action of Christians.

Situated in the context that is proper to it, Benedict XVI's "great refusal" is anything but a postponement to the future eschatological schism: it reminds us, on the contrary, that it is not possible for the Church to survive if it passively defers until the end of days the solution of the conflict that tears its "bipartite body" apart. As with the problem of legitimacy, so also the problem of what is just and what is unjust cannot be eliminated from the historical life of the Church, but must inspire in every instant the awareness of its decisions in the world. If one pretends to be ignorant, as the Church has often done, of the bipartite body, the *fusca* Church ends up prevailing over the *decora* and the eschatological drama loses all sense.

Benedict XVI's decision has again brought to light the eschatological mystery in all its disruptive force; but only in this way will the Church, which has gone astray in time, be able to find the right relationship with the end of time. In the Church, there are two irreconcilable and yet closely intertwined elements: economy and eschatology, the worldly-temporal element and that which keeps itself connected with the end of time and of the world. When the eschatological element disappears into the shadows, the worldly economy becomes properly infinite, which is to say, interminable and aimless. The paradox of the Church is that, from the eschatological point of view, it must renounce the world, but it cannot do this because, from the point of view of the economy, it is of the world, which it cannot renounce without renouncing itself. But this is exactly where the decisive crisis is situated: because courage—and this seems to us to be the ultimate sense of Benedict XVI's message—is nothing but the capacity to keep oneself connected with one's own end.

IO.

We have tried to interpret the exemplarity of Benedict XVI's gesture in the theological and ecclesiological context that is proper to it. But if this gesture

interests us, this certainly is not solely insofar as it refers to a problem internal to the Church, but much more because it allows us to focus on a genuinely political theme, that of justice, which like legitimacy cannot be eliminated from the praxis of our society. We know perfectly well that the body of our political society is also bipartite, like that of the Church and perhaps even more seriously so, mixing evil and good, crime and honesty, injustice and justice. And yet in the praxis of modern democracies, this is not a political and substantial problem, but a juridical and procedural one. Here also, as happened with the problem of legitimacy, it is settled on the level of norms that prohibit and punish, but one must then observe that the bipartition of the social body gets deeper by the day. From the perspective of the laissez-faire ideology that is dominant today, the paradigm of the self-regulating market has taken the place of that of justice and pretends to be able to govern an ever more ungovernable society according to exclusively technical criteria. Once again, a society can function only if justice (which corresponds to eschatology in the Church) does not remain a mere idea, entirely inert and impotent in the face of law and economy, but succeeds in finding political expression in a force capable of counterbalancing the progressive leveling out onto a single

technico-economic plane of the two coordinated but radically heterogeneous principles—legitimacy and legality, spiritual power and temporal power, *auctoritas* and *potestas*, justice and law—that constitute the most precious patrimony of European culture.

## II. *Mysterium iniquitatis*: History as Mystery

### I.

The title *mysterium iniquitatis* unambiguously suggests that what will be in question here is a reading of the famous passage from the Second Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians on the end of days. I have written “unambiguously,” because what has happened in our time is that a genuinely eschatological notion—namely the *mysterium iniquitatis*—which, as such, made sense only in its context, has been torn from its proper place and transformed into a contradictory ontological notion, that is to say, into a sort of ontology of evil. What made sense only as *philosophia ultima* has thus taken the place of *prima philosophia*.

Let us reread the passage from the Pauline epistle in its entirety:



As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by inspiration or by word or by a letter that claims to be sent by me, as though the day of the Lord were imminent. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the apostasy comes and the man of lawlessness [*ho anthropos tēs anomias*] is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when the time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness [*mystērion tēs anomias*, which the Vulgate translates as *mysterium iniquitatis*] is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. And then the lawless one [*anomos*, literally “the without-law”] will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will eliminate with the breath of his mouth, rendering him inoperative with the manifestation of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (2 Thessalonians 2:1–11)

When the Church was still interested in last things, this extraordinary passage stimulated the hermeneutical acumen of the Fathers in a special way, from Irenaeus to Jerome and from Hippolytus to Augustine. The interpreters’ attention was focused above all on

the identification of the two characters whom Paul calls “what—or the one who—restrains” (*to katechon*, *ho katechōn*; in the Vulgate: *quid detineat*, *qui tenet*) and “the man of lawlessness” (*ho anthropos tēs anomias*, literally “the man of the absence of law”; in the Vulgate: *homo peccati*), or simply *ho anomos* (“the outlaw”; in the Vulgate: *iniquus*). The latter, beginning with Irenaeus (*Against All Heresies*, 7.1), although Paul seems not to be familiar with the term, has been almost constantly identified with the Antichrist of the First Epistle of John (2:18). The identification was then accepted by Hippolytus, by Origen, by Tertullian, and finally by Augustine, so that it became a commonplace, even if some modern scholars have called it into doubt. In all these authors the Antichrist is always conceived as a man of flesh and blood—a real historical character like Nero, or a more or less imaginary one such as, according to Hippolytus, a certain Lateinos or Teitanos, so named from the number of the Beast of the Apocalypse. As Peterson has fittingly observed, even if he is in the service of Satan, the Antichrist is a man and not a demon.

Who, then, is “the one who or that which restrains” and must be taken out of the way so that the Antichrist (more precisely, following Paul’s words, the “outlaw”) can come? I would like to yield the floor to Augustine, who commented on this passage in *The*

*City of God* (XX, 19). After having written that the text in question doubtless refers to the coming of the Antichrist and that, on the other hand, the Apostle did not want to clearly express the identity of “the one who restrains,” because he was speaking to addressees who were already aware of it, he adds: “And thus we who have not their knowledge wish and are not able even with pains to understand what the apostle referred to, especially as his meaning is made still more obscure by what he adds. For what does he mean by ‘For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed’? I frankly confess I do not know what he means. I will nevertheless mention such conjectures as I have heard or read.”

At this point, Augustine gathers these “conjectures” into two groups:

Some [*quidam*] think that the Apostle Paul referred to the Roman empire, and that he was unwilling to use language more explicit [*aperte scribere*], lest he should incur the calumnious charge of wishing ill to the empire which it was hoped would be eternal; so that in saying, “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work,” he alluded to Nero, whose deeds already seemed to be as the deeds of Antichrist. And hence some suppose that he shall rise again and be Antichrist. Others, again, suppose that he is not even dead, but that he was concealed that he might be supposed to have been killed, and that he now lives in concealment in the vigor of that same age which he had

reached when he was believed to have perished, and will live until he is revealed in his own time and restored to his kingdom. But I wonder that men can be so audacious in their conjectures. However, it is not absurd to believe that these words of the apostle, “only until the one who now restrains it is removed,” refer to the Roman empire, as if it were said, “until the one who now reigns is removed.”

As to the second group of testimonies, Augustine sums them up in this way:

But others think that [the Apostle’s] words . . . refer only to the wicked and the hypocrites who are in the Church, until they reach a number so great as to furnish Antichrist with a great people, and that this is the mystery of iniquity, because it seems hidden. . . . [And] they suppose that it is to this same mystery John alludes in his epistle. . . . As therefore there went out from the Church many heretics, whom John calls “many antichrists,” at that time prior to the end, and which John calls “the last time,” so in the end they shall go out who do not belong to Christ, but to that last Antichrist, and then he shall be revealed.

2.

Even if Augustine does not mention anyone by name, it is nonetheless possible to identify the authors to whom he is referring. The *quidam* of the first group are easily inscribed in the tracks of Jerome, who was

occupied with the interpretation of the Pauline letter, among other things, in his letter to Algasia. It is this interpretation that Augustine cites when he says that the Apostle did not want to write openly in order not to be accused of desiring the collapse of the Empire that claimed to be eternal (Jerome had written: *nec vult aperte dicere Romanum Imperium destruendum, quod ipsi qui imperant aeternum putant*; Jerome, p. 18).

The second hypothesis, which identifies the *katechon* with the Church, comes from an author who exerted a particular influence on Augustine: Tyconius. He is an extraordinary character, without whom Augustine could not have written his masterpiece, *The City of God*, because it is from him that he drew both the idea of the two cities and that of the Church as *permixta* of good and evil. But Tyconius is important also because he realized fifteen centuries beforehand the Benjaminian program according to which doctrine can be legitimately pronounced only in the form of interpretation.

His *Liber regularum* (*Book of Rules*), which is considered the oldest treatise on sacred hermeneutics, in fact has the peculiarity that the rules that permit the interpretation of the Scriptures coincide with doctrine (which is, in this case, an ecclesiology).

The second rule, which bears the heading *De Domini corpore bipartito* ("On the bipartite body of the

Lord”), here interests us in a special way. According to Tyconius, the body of Christ, namely the Church, is constitutively divided. In reference to the verse of Song of Songs that he reads in a translation that is worded *fusca sum et decora*, he distinguishes a dark Church, composed of the *populus malus* of the wicked that forms the body of Satan, and a *decora*, honest Church, composed of Christ’s faithful. In the present state, the two bodies of the Church are inseparably commingled, but according to the Apostle’s prediction, they will be divided at the end of days: “Now this goes on from the time of the Lord’s passion until the church, which keeps it in check, withdraws from the midst of this mystery of lawlessness [*mysterium facinoris*] so that godlessness may be unveiled in its own time” (Tyconius, p. 74/123).

Tyconius thus thinks an eschatological time that goes from Christ’s passion up to the “mystery of lawlessness,” when the separation of the bipartite body of the Church will be realized. This means that already at the end of the fourth century there were authors who had identified the Church itself as the *katechon*, the cause of the delay of the parousia.

### 3.

All these interpretations of the Pauline text refer in any case to historical characters or powers and concern

events that will play out in the days that immediately precede the parousia. To understand the mystery of lawlessness means, therefore, to understand something that concerns the *eschaton*, that dramatic foreshortening of humanity's history that takes place at the end of days. As Paul says clearly, in 1 Corinthians 10:11, in the last day no typological or figural interpretation will be possible any longer, because all figures and all types were conceived for the end of days: what happens then is no longer a figure, but a fulfillment of every figure, in other words a historical reality and nothing else.

History as we know it is a Christian concept. "Christianity is a historical religion not only because it is founded on a historical character and on events that are supposed to have historically happened, but also because it confers on time, conceived as linear and irreversible, a soteriological meaning. Moreover: by binding its own destiny to history, it interprets and conceives itself as a function of a historical perspective and carries along with it a sort of philosophy or—more precisely—theology of history" (Puech, p. 35). A great French historian could for this reason write that "Christianity is a religion of historians . . . [because it is] in history that the great drama of Sin and Redemption, the central axis of all Christian thought, is unfolded" (Bloch, p. 38/4).

It is from the perspective of this historical drama therefore that I will attempt to read the Pauline text, displacing the focal point from the investigation of the identification of the two characters (the *katechōn* and the man of lawlessness) to the very structure of time that is implied in it. My hypothesis is that grasping what the *mysterium iniquitatis* is means nothing less than understanding the Pauline conception of messianic time (which is to say, of historical time, if it is true that eschatology is only an abbreviation or a model in miniature of humanity's history). For this reason, we must analyze the Pauline syntagma *mystērion tēs anomias* (the Vulgate's *mysterium iniquitatis*): what does this expression mean, which according to Augustine renders the text's *obscura verba* still more obscure? And above all, what does *mystērion* mean?

#### 4.

It is on the correct interpretation of this word that Odo Casel—and following him, what has been called the “liturgical movement” of the twentieth century—founded his project of a renewal of the Church beginning from the spirit of liturgy. Already in his doctoral thesis, *De philosophorum graecorum silentio mystico* (*On the Mystical Silence of the Greek Philosophers*, 1919),



Casel shows that in Greek *mystērion* does not designate a secret doctrine which could be formulated discursively but which it is prohibited to reveal. Rather the term *mystērion* indicates a praxis, an action or a drama in the theatrical sense of the term as well, that is, a set of gestures, acts, and words through which a divine action or passion is efficaciously actualized in the world and time for the salvation of those who participate in it. For this reason, Clement of Alexandria calls the Eleusinian mysteries *drama mysticon*, “mystical drama” (Clement, p. 30), and consequently defines the Christian message as a “mystery of the logos” (ibid., p. 254).

It is not my intention here to take sides in the ecclesiological debate over the primacy of liturgy over dogma or of dogma over liturgy, which, coming to terms with the liturgical movement, Pius XII tried to resolve with the encyclical *Mediator Dei*. I think, however, that it is legitimate to separate the extraordinary exercise of “theological philology” that Casel carried out on the term *mysterium* from his theses on liturgy, and that it is not necessary to share his ideas on the primacy of liturgy over doctrine to realize that so much of what he writes on the derivation of the term from the vocabulary of Hellenistic mysteries is substantially correct. After all, Casel did nothing but reclaim an old tradition, which can be traced back to

the *Exercitationes de rebus sacris* (*Exercises on Sacred Matters*, 1655) of Isaac Casaubon, one of the founders of modern philology.

5.

A careful analysis of the passages in which Paul makes use of the term *mystērion* not only confirms Casel's thesis, but permits us to specify it further. This is not the place for an exhaustive analysis of all the occurrences of the term *mystērion* in the Pauline epistles (anyone who is interested can find it in Agamben, pp. 21–26); here I will limit myself to citing 1 Corinthians 2:6–8: “Yet among the perfect [*teleiois*, the initiated] we do express [*laloumen*, literally ‘we speak, we put into words’] the Wisdom of God, though it is not a wisdom of this world or of the princes of this world, who are rendered inoperative. But we express God's wisdom in a mystery [*laloumen en mystērioi*; Vulgate, *loquimur in mysterio*], wisdom that was hidden and that God had decided before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” It is completely obvious that the mystery is not a secret here; it is, on the contrary, something that is said and manifested. It is not the wisdom of God, but that by means of which this wisdom is expressed

and revealed, in such a way that—as happens in the mysteries—the uninitiated do not comprehend it. And what is the content of this mystery? “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23).

The wisdom of God is therefore expressed in the form of a mystery, which is nothing other than the historical drama of the passion, namely an event that really happened, which the uninitiated do not understand and the faithful grasp for their salvation. In the time of the end, mystery and history correspond without remainder.

This is still more obvious in the three passages in which *mystērion* is juxtaposed with the term *oikonomia*: Colossians 1:24–25 and Ephesians 1:9–10 and 3:9. Linking mystery to economy—as Paul does in these passages—means linking mystery to history. Even if, in Paul, economy cannot yet coincide with mystery—as will happen later in the Fathers who, beginning in the third century, will construct the doctrine of theological economy, that is, of the salvific action of God in the world—to speak, as Paul does, of an “economy of the mystery” entails that mystery manifests itself in the eschatological events that Paul lives and announces. There is a “historical economy” of mystery. It is for this reason that Hippolytus and Tertullian could, without too much difficulty, reverse

the Pauline syntagma “economy of the mystery” into “mystery of the economy”: now what is mysterious is the very praxis by means of which God arranges and reveals the divine presence in the world of creatures.

## 6.

The history of the end (which does not coincide with the end of history) is therefore presented in Paul as a mystery, that is to say, as a sacred drama in which the salvation and damnation of human beings is at stake, a drama that can be seen and understood (as happens for the initiated) or seen and not understood (this is the case of the damned). One of the principal objections that modern theologians have raised against the thesis of the proximity between pagan mysteries and Christian mysteries—namely the decisively historical character of the Christian religion—is thus shown to be devoid of any foundation: the mystery of which Paul speaks is in itself historical, because the history of the last days is presented to his eyes as a mystery, which is to say, as a mystical drama or a “theater” in which the apostles also play a role (“We have become a theater for the world, for angels and human beings”; 1 Corinthians 4:9). It is from this perspective that one must understand the Fathers’ frequent recourse to theatrical metaphors: when Ignatius of Antioch calls the

cross a “*mēchanē* of the return to heaven” and pseudo-Athanasius describes it as a “celestial machine,” *mēchanē ourania*, it goes without saying that *mēchanē* is the technical term that in Greek tragedy designates the theatrical machine by means of which the god descended onto the scene and reascended into heaven.

7.

What does the *mysterium iniquitatis* of the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians add to this conception of mystery? Here the eschatological drama is, so to speak, staged, in the form of a conflict or a dialectic among three characters: the *katechōn* (the “one who restrains”), the *anomos* (the “outlaw”), and the messiah (God and Satan are also named, but remain in the background). Here one should think of the scenographic indications in the “mystery” in the theatrical sense of the term which is the *Ludus de Antichristo* (*Play of the Antichrist*), composed and performed in Germany in the twelfth century: “The Temple of the Lord and seven royal seats arranged in the following manner: to the east the Temple of the Lord; around it are arranged the seat of the King of Jerusalem and the seat of Synagoga. To the west the seat of the Emperor of the Romans; around it are arranged the seat of the King of the Teutons and the seat of the King of the

Franks. . . . Suddenly the Antichrist enters” (*Ludus*, p. 4/67). Here time becomes space and history immediately becomes mystery, that is, theater.

## 8.

The structure of eschatological time—this is Paul’s message—is twofold: there is, on the one hand, a slowing element (the *katechon*, whether it is identified with the Empire or with the Church, in any case an institution), and, on the other, a decisive element (the messiah). Between the two is situated the appearance of the man of lawlessness (the Antichrist, according to the Fathers), whose revelation, which coincides with the *katechon*’s exiting the scene, precipitates the final battle. The messiah—who, in Paul as well as in the Jewish tradition, renders the law inoperative—inaugurates a zone of lawlessness that coincides with messianic time and in this way frees the *anomos*, the outlaw, who is in this way very similar to the Christian (we do well not to forget that Paul defines himself at one time as *hos anomos*, “without law”; “To those without [or, also, outside] law, I became as one without—or outside—law”; 1 Corinthians 9:21). The *katechon* is the power—the Empire, but also the Church, like every juridically constituted authority—that opposes and conceals the lawlessness that defines

messianic time and in this way slows the revelation of the “mystery of lawlessness.” The unveiling of this mystery coincides with the manifestation of the inoperativity of the law and with the essential illegitimacy of every power in messianic time. (And by all appearances, this is what is happening today under our noses, when the powers of state act openly as outside the law. In this sense, the *anomos* does not represent anything but the unveiling of the lawlessness that today defines every constituted power, within which State and terrorism form a single system.)

## 9.

I realize that I myself am making conjectures, similar to those whose arrogance Augustine stigmatizes. Therefore it will be, if not more prudent, then certainly more useful to concentrate on the structure of eschatological time that is in question in the epistle. As we have seen, this structure entails a slowing element and a decisive element. The *katechon* acts as an arrest and, at the same time, a dilation of history: time is held in suspense, in such a way that the decisive crisis can never come. The moment when the delay reaches its extreme limit coincides with the revelation of the “outlaw.” This latter—hence his identification with the Antichrist (*anti-* does not mean opposition

so much as resemblance)—appears as a counterfeit of the parousia: blocked history takes on the figure of the end of history—or in modern terms, of posthistory, in which nothing can happen any more. From this perspective, one can better understand the double character of messianic time, which has often been defined, in a perhaps contradictory way, as an “already” and a “not yet.” It is not a matter of an abstract temporal structure, but of a drama or a conflict in which absolutely concrete historical forces act. The “not yet” defines the action of the *katechon*, of the force that restrains; the “already” refers to the urgency of the decisive element. And the text of the epistle allows for no doubt as to the final outcome of the drama: the Lord will eliminate the *anomos* “with the breath of his mouth, rendering him inoperative with the manifestation of his coming” (2 Thessalonians 2:8).

## IO.

These are actors and vicissitudes of the eschatological “mystery” that the epistle’s author has evoked with his *obscura verba*, which, once restored to their dramatic context, are no longer so obscure. And yet the Church, which has put aside the eschatological perspective that is consubstantial with it, seems to have lost all awareness of this context. The *mysterium*



*iniquitatis* has been extrapolated from its eschatological context, in which alone it could find a coherent sense, and transformed into an atemporal structure, which aims to give a theological jurisdiction to evil and, at the same time, to slow and “hold back” the end of days.

After the two World Wars, scandal in the face of horror has driven philosophers and theologians, based on Christ’s kenotic moment, to root the *mysterium* in God, in a sort of monstrous—forgive me for the term—“kakokenodicy,” a justification of evil through *kenosis*, totally forgetting its eschatological meaning. Thus in 2002 the Gregorian University published, under the title *Mysterium iniquitatis*, the acts of a conference in which the text of Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians was never cited. This is not surprising, since one of the participants candidly affirmed that “the mystery of evil is a reality of our everyday experience, which we do not manage to explain or dominate.” Unfortunately, even the authors who reproach the Church for its abandonment of eschatology end up transforming the drama of the end of days into an ontotheological structure. Here we are clearly dealing with a Gnostic gesture (or at least, as has been suggested, a semi-Marcionite one; Milana, p. 149) that opposes not two divinities but two attributes of the same divinity in a sort of “originary ambiguity,”

which, especially among the philosophers, is inspired by a mixture between the late Schelling and Dostoevsky. In any case, these theologians and philosophers, perhaps without realizing it, end up, to take up the words of the Apostle, causing evil “to take [its] seat in the Temple of God, declaring [it] to be God.”

## II.

By renouncing every eschatological experience of its own historical action, the Church—at least on the level of praxis, because, as to doctrine, twentieth-century theology from Barth to Moltmann and von Balthasar has seen a renewal of eschatological themes—has itself created the specter of the *mysterium iniquitatis*. If it wants to free itself of this specter, it is necessary for it to find again the eschatological experience of its historical action—of all historical action—as a drama in which the decisive conflict is always underway. Only in this way will it be able to make use of a criterion of action that is not subaltern—as it de facto is now—with respect to profane politics and the progress of sciences and technologies, which it seems to pursue everywhere, seeking in vain to set limits to them. One cannot in fact understand what is happening in the Church today, if one does not see that in every sphere it

follows the currents of the profane universe that its *oikonomia* has generated.

In the Church there are two irreconcilable elements, which nonetheless never stop intertwining historically: *oikonomia*—God’s salvific action in the world and in time—and eschatology—the end of the world and of time. When the eschatological element has been put aside, the development of the secularized *oikonomia* has been perverted and has become literally without end, which is to say, without a goal. From this moment, the mystery of evil, displaced from its proper place and erected into an ontological structure, blocks the Church from any true choice and at the same time provides an alibi for its ambiguities.

I believe that only if the *mysterium iniquitatis* is restored to its eschatological context can a political action again become possible, in the theological sphere as in the profane. Evil is not a gloomy *theological* drama that paralyzes every action and renders it enigmatic and ambiguous, but it is a *historical* drama in which each person’s decision is always in question. Schmitt’s theory, which founds politics in a “power that holds back,” has no basis in Paul, in whom the *katachon* is only one of the elements of the eschatological drama and cannot be extrapolated from it. And it is in this historical drama, in which the *eschaton*, the last day, coincides with the present, with the Pauline

“time of the now,” and in which the bipartite nature of the Church’s body as of every profane institution is finally reaching its apocalyptic unveiling—it is in this drama, always underway, that all are called to play their part without reservation and without ambiguity.

# Appendix

## DECLARATION OF CELESTINE V

*Ego Caelestinus Papa Quintus motus ex legitimis causis, idest causa humilitatis, et melioris vitae, et conscientiae illesae, debilitate corporis, defectu scientiae, et malignitate Plebis, infirmitate personae, et ut praeteritae consolationis possim reparare quietem; sponte, ac libere cedo Papatui, et expresse renuncio loco, et Dignitati, oneri, et honori, et do plenam, et liberam ex nunc sacro coetui Cardinalium facultatem eligendi, et providendi duntaxat Canonice universali Ecclesiae de Pastore.*

We, Celestine, Pope V, moved by legitimate reasons, that is to say, for the sake of humility, of a better life and an unspotted conscience, of weakness of body and of want of knowledge, the malignity of the people, and personal infirmity, to recover the tranquility and consolation of our former life, do freely and voluntarily resign the pontificate, the place, the dignity, occupation, and honors of which we expressly renounce, and we give full and free faculty to the college of cardinals canonically to elect a pastor of the Universal Church.

*Translator's note: English translation drawn from Artaud de Montor, The Lives and Times of the Popes, vol. 3 (New York: Catholic Publication Society of America, 1911).*

## DECLARATION OF BENEDICT XVI

*Fratres carissimi,*

*Non solum propter tres canonizationes ad hoc Consistorium vos convocavi, sed etiam ut vobis decisionem magni momenti pro Ecclesiae vita communicem. Conscientia mea iterum atque iterum coram Deo explorata ad cognitionem certam perveni vires meas ingravescente aetate non iam aptas esse ad munus Petrinum aequè administrandum.*

*Bene conscius sum hoc munus secundum suam essentiam spiritualem non solum agendo et loquendo exsequi debere, sed non minus patiendo et orando. Attamen in mundo nostri temporis rapidis mutationibus subiecto et quaestionibus magni ponderis pro vita fidei perturbato ad navem Sancti Petri gubernandam et ad annuntian- dum Evangelium etiam vigor quidam corporis et animae necessarius est, qui ultimis mensibus in me modo tali minuitur, ut incapacitatem meam ad ministerium mihi commissum bene administrandum agnoscere debeam. Quapropter bene conscius ponderis huius actus plena lib- ertate declaro me ministerio Episcopi Romae, Successoris Sancti Petri, mihi per manus Cardinalium die 19 aprilis MMV commisso renuntiare ita ut a die 28 februarii MMXIII, hora 20, sedes Romae, sedes Sancti Petri vacet*

Dear Brothers,

I have convoked you to this Consistory, not only for the three canonizations, but also to communicate to you a decision of great importance for the life of the Church. After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry. I am well aware that this ministry, due to its essential spiritual nature, must be carried out not only with words and deeds, but no less with prayer and suffering. However, in today's world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me. For this reason, and well aware of the seriousness of this act, with full freedom I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter, entrusted to me by the Cardinals on 19 April 2005, in such a way, that as from 28 February



*et Conclave ad eligendum novum Summum Pontificem ab his quibus competit convocandum esse.*

*Fratres carissimi, ex toto corde gratias ago vobis pro omni amore et labore, quo mecum pondus ministerii mei portastis et veniam peto pro omnibus defectibus meis. Nunc autem Sanctam Dei Ecclesiam curae Summi eius Pastoris, Domini nostri Iesu Christi confidimus sanctamque eius Matrem Mariam imploramus, ut patribus Cardinalibus in eligendo novo Summo Pontifice materna sua bonitate assistat. Quod ad me attinet etiam in futuro vita orationi dedicata Sanctae Ecclesiae Dei toto ex corde servire velim.*

*Ex Aedibus Vaticanis, die 10 mensis februarii MMXIII  
Benedictus PP. XVI*

2013, at 20:00 hours, the See of Rome, the See of Saint Peter, will be vacant and a Conclave to elect the new Supreme Pontiff will have to be convoked by those whose competence it is.

Dear Brothers, I thank you most sincerely for all the love and work with which you have supported me in my ministry and I ask pardon for all my defects. And now, let us entrust the Holy Church to the care of Our Supreme Pastor, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and implore his holy Mother Mary, so that she may assist the Cardinal Fathers with her maternal solicitude, in electing a new Supreme Pontiff. With regard to myself, I wish to also devotedly serve the Holy Church of God in the future through a life dedicated to prayer.

From the Vatican, 10 February 2013  
Benedictus PP XVI

*Translator's note: Both the Latin and English texts are drawn from the Vatican's web archive.*

TYCONIUS, *LIBER REGULARUM*

*Translator's note:* Both of the excerpts below are taken from *Tyconius: The Book of Rules*, trans. William S. Babcock (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). All biblical quotes are left as they appear in this translation; footnote Scripture references have been converted to parenthetical references. Reprinted by permission of SBL Press.

*II. The Lord's Bipartite Body*

Far more necessary is the rule concerning the bipartite character of the Lord's body; and so we must examine it all the more carefully, keeping it before our eyes through all the scriptures. For just as the transition from head to body and back again, as indicated above, is only seen by reason, so also reason alone sees the transition and return from one part of the body to the other, from the right-hand part to the left or from the left to the right, as was clear in the previous section.

For when he tells the one body, "unseen treasures I will disclose to you, that you may know that I am the Lord, and I will take you to myself," he adds, "but you do not know me, that I am God and there is no other God besides me, and you were ignorant of me" (Isaiah 34:3–5). He is speaking to the one body; but do both

phrases—“unseen treasures I will open to you, that you may know that I am God, for the sake of Jacob my servant,” and “but you do not know me”—refer to a single mind? Did Jacob, with one and the same mind, both receive and not receive God’s promise? Or again, do both, “but you do not know me” and “you were ignorant of me” apply to the same mind? “You were ignorant” is an expression used only in speaking to someone who now knows; but “you do not know” is addressed to the person who “draws near to God with his lips, yet is far from him in his heart” (Isaiah 29:13), even though he was called precisely to know and, visibly speaking, belongs to exactly the same body. It is to this person that he says, “but you do not know me.”

Again: “I will lead the blind in a way they do not know; and they will tread paths they do not know; and I will turn darkness into light for them and make the crooked straight. I will do what I say, and I will not forsake them. But they have turned their back” (Isaiah 42:16–17). Are those who have been turned back the same ones of whom he said “I will not forsake them”—and not rather a part of them?

Again the Lord says to Jacob: “do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, bring them up, and to the south, do not forbid them. Bring back my songs from far away and my

daughters from the end of the earth, all among whom my name is invoked. For I fashioned him in my glory, and I formed and made him, and I have brought forth a blind people, and their eyes too are blind, and they have deaf ears” (Isaiah 43:5–8). Are the blind and the deaf the same ones whom he fashioned in his glory?

Again: “At the first your fathers and their princes committed a crime against me, and I gave Jacob to destruction and Israel to the curse. Now listen to me, Jacob my servant, and Israel whom I have chosen” (Isaiah 43:27–44:1). He shows us that the Jacob he gave to destruction, the Israel who was cursed, was the Jacob he had not chosen.

Again: “I formed you as my servant, you are mine, Israel; do not forget me. For, behold, I have swept away your crimes like a cloud and your sins like a mist. Turn to me and I will redeem you” (Isaiah 44:21–22). Is the one whose sins he has swept away, to whom he says, “you are mine,” and whom he reminds not to forget him, the same one to whom he says, “turn to me”? Are anyone’s sins swept away before he is turned?

Again: “I know that as one rejected you will be rejected. For my name’s sake I will show you my greatness and will draw my excellence over you” (Isaiah 48:8–9). Does he show his greatness to the rejected or wrap him in his excellence?

Again: “It was not an elder nor an angel, but he himself who saved them, because he loved them and pitied them; he himself redeemed them and lifted them up and exalted them all the days of their life. But they were rebellious, and they grieved the Holy Spirit” (Isaiah 63:9–10). If he exalted them all the days of their life, when were they rebellious or when did they grieve the Holy Spirit?

Again, God plainly promises to the one body both that it will be kept safe and that it will be destroyed when he says, “Jerusalem, a rich city, whose tents will not be moved, nor will the pegs of your tent ever be disturbed or its ropes broken,” and then adds, “your lines have been broken because the mast of your ship failed, your sails hung slack, and it will not raise its pennon until it is given over to destruction” (Isaiah 33:20, 23).

Again, the bipartite character of Christ’s body is indicated in brief: “I am black and beautiful” (Song of Songs 1:5). By no means is the church—“which has no spot or wrinkle” (Ephesians 5:27), which the Lord cleansed by his own blood—black in any part, except in the left-hand part through which “the name of God is blasphemed among the gentiles” (Romans 2:24). Otherwise it is wholly beautiful, as he says: “you are wholly beautiful, my love, and there is no fault in you” (Song of Songs 4:7). And indeed she says why it is that

she is both black and beautiful: “like the tent of Kedar, like the tent-curtain of Solomon” (Song of Songs 1:5). She shows that there are two tents, one royal and one servile. Yet both spring from Abraham, for Kedar is Ishmael’s son. And furthermore, in another passage, the church groans that it has dwelt so long with this Kedar, i.e., with the servant descended from Abraham: “Woe is me that my sojourn has been so lengthy, that I have lived among the tents of Kedar. Too long has my soul been on sojourn. With those who hate peace, I was peaceful; when I spoke to them, they made war against me” (Psalm 120:5–7). Yet we cannot claim that the tent of Kedar is outside the church. She herself mentions the “tent of Kedar” and “of Solomon”; and that is why she says, “I am black and beautiful.” Those who are outside the church do not make it black. It is in virtue of this mystery that, in the Apocalypse, the Lord now calls the seven angels (i.e., the septiform church) holy and keepers of his precepts and now shows the same angels to be guilty of many crimes and in need of repentance (see Revelation 2–3). And in the gospel he makes it clear that one of the leaders is a body of diverse merits when he says, “blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, finds at his work,” and then adds, speaking of the same servant, “but if that wicked servant . . .” This wicked servant “the Lord will split into two parts.” I ask, will he split

or divide the whole servant? Note then that it is not the whole, but “his part” that “he will put with the hypocrites” (Matthew 24:46, 48, 51); for he is showing us the body in one person.

Accordingly it is by this mystery that we must interpret, throughout the scriptures, any passage where God says that Israel will perish as it deserves or that his own inheritance is accursed. For the apostle often argues, especially in Romans, that whatever is said of the whole body must be interpreted as applying to the part. “With respect to Israel, what does he say? All day I reached out to a rebellious people.” And to show that this refers to the part, he says, “I ask, has God rejected his inheritance? Not at all. For I am myself an Israelite, descended from Abraham by the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (Romans 10:21–11:2). And after he has taught us how we are to understand this form of expression, he uses the same kind of expression to show that the one body is both good and evil when he says, “as regards the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but as regards election they are loved for their father’s sake” (Romans 11:28). Are the enemies the same as the ones who are loved? Can both descriptions apply to Caiaphas? Thus, in all the scriptures, the Lord gives testimony that the one body of Abraham’s line, in every case, both grows and flourishes and goes to ruin.



*VII. The Devil and His Body (Excerpt)*

The relation of the devil and his body can be conceived in short order, if we keep in mind, here also, what we have said about the Lord and his body. The transition from head to body is recognized by the same kind of reasoning. For example, in Isaiah, this is said of the king of Babylon: "how the daystar, rising in the morning, has fallen from heaven! The one who sends out to all the nations has been crushed on the earth! You said in your heart: I will ascend to heaven, I will set my throne above the stars of God, I will sit on the high mountain above the high mountains to the north, I will rise above the clouds, I will be like the Most High. But now you will go down to the underworld in the depths of the earth. All who see you will stare at you in amazement and will say: this is the man who makes the earth tremble, who shakes kings, who makes the whole world a desert; he destroyed cities and did not loose his captives' bonds. All the kings of the nations lay in honor, each man in his own house. But you have been cast out on the mountains, despised like a dead man, along with all who fell, run through by the sword, and who are going down to the underworld. As a garment spattered with blood will not come clean, neither will you be clean, for you have brought my land to ruin and have killed my people.

Your evil lineage will not last for ever. Prepare your sons to be killed for the sins of your father so that they never rise again” (Isaiah 14:12–21). In the king of Babylon are signified both all kings and all the people, for it is one body.

“How the daystar, rising in the morning, has fallen from heaven! The one who sends out to all nations has been broken to pieces on earth! You said in your heart: I will ascend to heaven, I will set my throne above the stars of God” (Isaiah 14:12–13). The devil promises himself no such thing. He was not strong enough to resist being cast down; and he retains no hope that he can ascend to heaven by striving once again. Even less can a man have such hopes. Yet it says that this is a man: “this is the man who makes the earth tremble” (Isaiah 14:16). But beyond this reasoning, according to which neither devil nor man can hope to be able to ascend to heaven and, enthroned above the stars of God, be like God, scripture itself also admonishes us to make inquiry on another point. For, if he says that he will set his throne in heaven and above the stars of God, how is he going to sit on the high mountain or above the high mountains to the north or on the clouds so as to be like the Most High. For the Most High has no such seat.

As we shall see as the scripture proceeds, it is the church that he calls “heaven.” And it is from this

heaven that the morning daystar falls. For the daystar is bipartite; and one part is holy, as the Lord says in the Apocalypse, speaking of himself and his own body, “I am the root and offspring of David, and the bright morning star, bridegroom and bride” (Revelation 22:16–17). Likewise, in the same book: “those who win the victory, to them I will give the morning star” (Revelation 2:26, 28), i.e., so they may be the morning star like Christ whom we have received. It is therefore a part of the daystar—i.e., the enemy body which consists of devil, kings and people—that falls from heaven and is broken to pieces on earth. To these kings wisdom says: “listen then, kings, and understand; learn, you judges of the ends of the earth; pay attention, you who hold sway over multitudes and plume yourselves among the throngs of the nations. Your power was given to you by the Lord and your strength by the most High; he will inspect your works and put your designs under scrutiny. For you, although ministers of his kingdom, have not judged rightly, nor have you kept the law” (Wisdom 6:1–4).

Thus the king of Babylon represents the whole body. But it is according to the context that we understand to which part of the body he pertains. “The daystar has fallen from heaven” can pertain to the entire body. Similarly “I will ascend to heaven, I will set my throne above the stars of God” can pertain

to the head and to the elders who suppose that it is for them to rule over the stars of God, i.e., the saints, when in fact the younger will rule over them, as it is written: “the elder will serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23; cf. Romans 9:12–13). To this Esau, i.e., to the evil brothers, the Lord speaks in this way through the prophet Obadiah: “raising his dwelling on high, saying in his heart: who will bring me down to earth? Though you rise up like the eagle and set your nest among the stars, I will bring you down, says the Lord” (Obadiah 3–4).

“I will sit on the high mountain above the high mountains to the north, I will rise above the clouds, I will be like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:13–14). The “high mountain” is a people puffed up with pride; the “high mountains” are all individuals puffed up with pride. Joined together, they make the mountain, i.e., the devil’s body. For that there are many evil mountains, scripture states in the following way: “the mountains are carried into the heart of the sea” (Psalm 46:2). And again: “the foundations of the mountains trembled and shook, for God was angry at them” (Psalm 18:7). For, even if the Lord’s body, i.e., the church, is called a mountain, the individuals who make up the church are also called mountains, as it is written: “by him was I made king on Zion, his holy mountain, proclaiming his decrees” (Psalm

2:6–7). And again: “I will destroy the Assyrians in my land and on my mountains” (Isaiah 14:25). And again: “let the mountains and the hills bring peace for your people” (Psalm 72:3). And again: “the mountains will leap like rams, and the hills like lambs” (Psalm 114:4). God has his throne on Mount Zion and on the mountains of Israel and on his holy clouds, which are the church, as it is written: “let all the earth stand in fear before the Lord, for he has risen from his holy clouds” (Zechariah 2:13). And again: “I will command the clouds to rain no rain on it” (Isaiah 5:6). Again: “storm cloud and dark cloud surround him” (Psalm 97:2). And that he dwells on Mount Zion, he declares in this way: “you will know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling on Zion, my holy mountain” (Joel 3:17). The devil also has his seat on a mountain, but on Seir, which is Esau, i.e., the mountain of the evil brothers. God rebukes this mountain through Ezekiel and says that he “will leave it desolate, to the joy of all the earth” (Ezekiel 35:14; cf. Ezekiel 35:15 and Genesis 36:8), because of its enmity to Jacob. This is the mountain, these the mountains of the north. On these the devil sits and rules, as it were, the clouds of heaven; to this extent he claims to be like the Most High.

There are two parts in the church, one of the south and one of the north. The Lord abides in the southern part, as it is written: “where you graze your flock,

where you abide in the south” (Song of Songs 1:7). But the devil abides in the north, as the Lord says to his people: “the invader from the north I will drive away from you and will force him out into a land without water”—i.e., into his own people—“and drive his vanguard into the first sea and his rearguard into the last sea” (Joel 2:20), which means into the first people and the last. This world was constructed in the likeness of the church. In it the rising sun follows no other course than through the south and, once it has traversed the southern part, it moves unseen in returning to its place. So also our Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal sun, passes through his own part, which is why he refers to it, too, as the south. But for the north, i.e., for the enemy part, he does not rise, as these same people will report when they come to judgment: “the light of justice has not shone for us, and the sun did not rise for us” (Wisdom 5:6). “For those who fear” the Lord, however, “the sun of justice rises, and there is healing in its wings” (Malachi 4:2), as it is written. But for the evil it will be night at midday, as it is written: “as they looked for light, darkness came upon them; as they looked for brightness, they walked in deep night. They will feel for the wall like a blind man; and like a man with no eyes they will feel their way. They will stumble at midday as if it were the middle of the night” (Isaiah 59:9–10). Again: “the sun will set at

midday, and the daylight will go dark upon the earth” (Amos 8:9). Again: “therefore you will have night without vision and darkness without divination; and the sun will set upon the prophets, and the daylight will darken over them” (Micah 3:6).

From the south God threatens this people, as when he rebukes Sor through Ezekiel and says: “the south wind has shattered you” (Ezekiel 27:26). If he also permits it to wreak havoc—when he says, “arise, north wind; and come, south wind, blow through my garden, and my fragrances will waft down” (Song of Songs 4:16)—the Holy Spirit, who blows through the Lord’s garden, resists the rising evil spirit; and the fragrances are drawn out, i.e., a sweet odor is offered (cf. Ephesians 5:2). And again through Ezekiel, God says that from the remnants of the evil people he will lead a part of that same people against his own people, which is the mystery of lawlessness (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:7): “behold, I am against you Gog, prince of Rosh, Meschech and Tubal. And I will gather you and lead you forth and take you from the farthest reaches of the north; and I will lead you against the mountains of Israel. And I will smash your bow from your left hand and your arrows from your right hand and dash you against the mountains of Israel” (Ezekiel 39:1–4). Now this goes on from the time of the Lord’s passion until the church, which keeps it in check, withdraws

from the midst of this mystery of lawlessness so that godlessness may be unveiled in its own time, as the apostle says: “and you now know what keeps it in check so that it may be unveiled in its own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, only that what now keeps it in check does so until it passes from the midst; and then the godless one will be revealed” (2 Thessalonians 2:6–8). And in Jeremiah we read that the sinners of Israel are assembled in the north, when the Lord says, “go and read out these words to the north and say: turn back to me, house of Israel, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 3:12). The southern part, certainly, is the Lord’s, as is also written in Job: “from the southern part will your life sprout forth” (Job 11:17); the north is the devil’s. And both parts appear in all the world.

AUGUSTINE, *CITY OF GOD*, BOOK XX, CHAPTER 19

*Author’s note:* In *De civitate Dei*, Saint Augustine devotes several pages to direct commentary on the verses from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians to which we have made reference in our reflections.

*Translator’s note:* This translation is based on that found in Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodds, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.:



Eerdmans, 1988). The quotation from 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 is abbreviated in the English translation; I have supplied it in full, rendering vv. 1–11 as they appear in the body text above and using the NRSV for the final verse as well as for the quotation from 1 John.

I see that I must omit many of the statements of the gospels and epistles about this last judgment, that this volume may not become unduly long; but I can on no account omit what the Apostle Paul says, in writing to the Thessalonians:

As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by inspiration or by word or by a letter that claims to be sent by me, as though the day of the Lord were imminent. Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the apostasy comes and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know what is now restraining him, so that he may be revealed when the time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will eliminate with the breath of his mouth, rendering him inoperative with the

manifestation of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false, so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned. (2 Thessalonians 2:1–12)

No one can doubt that he wrote this of Antichrist and of the day of judgment, which he here calls the day of the Lord, nor that he declared that this day should not come unless he first came who is called the apostate—apostate, to wit, from the Lord God. And if this may justly be said of all the ungodly, how much more of him? But it is uncertain in what temple he shall sit, whether in that ruin of the temple which was built by Solomon, or in the Church; for the apostle would not call the temple of any idol or demon the temple of God. And on this account some think that in this passage Antichrist means not the prince himself alone, but his whole body, that is, the mass of men who adhere to him, along with him their prince; and they also think that we should render the Greek more exactly were we to read, not “in the temple of God,” but “for” or “as the temple of God,” as if he himself were the temple of God, the Church. Then as for the words, “And you know what is now restraining him,” i.e., you know what

hindrance or cause of delay there is, “so that he may be revealed when the time comes”; they show that he was unwilling to make an explicit statement, because he said that they knew. And thus we who have not their knowledge wish and are not able even with pains to understand what the apostle referred to, especially as his meaning is made still more obscure by what he adds. For what does he mean by “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains it is removed”? I frankly confess I do not know what he means. I will nevertheless mention such conjectures as I have heard or read.

Some think that the Apostle Paul referred to the Roman empire, and that he was unwilling to use language more explicit, lest he should incur the calumnious charge of wishing ill to the empire which it was hoped would be eternal; so that in saying, “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work,” he alluded to Nero, whose deeds already seemed to be as the deeds of Antichrist. And hence some suppose that he shall rise again and be Antichrist. Others, again, suppose that he is not even dead, but that he was concealed that he might be supposed to have been killed, and that he now lives in concealment in the vigor of that same age which he had reached when he was believed to have perished, and will live until he is revealed in his own time and restored to his

kingdom. But I wonder that men can be so audacious in their conjectures. However, it is not absurd to believe that these words of the apostle, “only until the one who now restrains it is removed,” refer to the Roman empire, as if it were said, “until the one who now reigns is removed.” “And then the lawless one will be revealed”: no one doubts that this means Antichrist. But others think that the words, “And you know what is now restraining him,” and “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work,” refer only to the wicked and the hypocrites who are in the Church, until they reach a number so great as to furnish Antichrist with a great people, and that this is the mystery of iniquity, because it seems hidden; also that the apostle is exhorting the faithful tenaciously to hold the faith they hold when he says, “only until the one who now restrains it is removed,” that is, until the mystery of iniquity which now is hidden departs from the Church. For they suppose that it is to this same mystery John alludes when in his epistle he says, “Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us” (1 John 2:18–19). As therefore

there went out from the Church many heretics, whom John calls “many antichrists,” at that time prior to the end, and which John calls “the last time,” so in the end they shall go out who do not belong to Christ, but to that last Antichrist, and then he shall be revealed.

Thus various, then, are the conjectural explanations of the obscure words of the apostle. That which there is no doubt he said is this, that Christ will not come to judge quick and dead unless Antichrist, His adversary, first come to seduce those who are dead in soul; although their seduction is a result of God’s secret judgment already passed. For, as it is said his presence shall be after “The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing.” For then shall Satan be loosed, and by means of that Antichrist shall work with all power in a lying though a wonderful manner. It is commonly questioned whether these works are called “signs and lying wonders” because he is to deceive men’s senses by false appearances, or because the things he does, though they be true prodigies, shall be a lie to those who shall believe that such things could be done only by God, being ignorant of the devil’s power, and especially of such unexampled power as he shall then for the first time put forth. For when he fell from heaven as fire, and at a stroke swept away from the holy Job his

numerous household and his vast flocks, and then as a whirlwind rushed upon and smote the house and killed his children, these were not deceitful appearances, and yet they were the works of Satan to whom God had given this power. Why they are called signs and lying wonders, we shall then be more likely to know when the time itself arrives. But whatever be the reason of the name, they shall be such signs and wonders as shall seduce those who shall deserve to be seduced, “because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” Neither did the apostle scruple to go on to say, “For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false.” For God shall *send*, because God shall permit the devil to do these things, the permission being by his own just judgment, though the doing of them is in pursuance of the devil’s unrighteous and malignant purpose, “so that all who have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness will be condemned.” Therefore, being judged, they shall be seduced, and, being seduced, they shall be judged. But, being judged, they shall be seduced by those secretly just and justly secret judgments of God, with which He has never ceased to judge since the first sin of the rational creatures; and, being seduced, they shall be judged in that last and manifest judgment administered by Jesus Christ, who was himself most unjustly judged and shall most justly judge.

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