

End of the World

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Preface

IT WAS GOD'S MERCY to make us witnesses of a major historical moment when, after a 70-year yoke, without any war or insurrection, the godless atheistic regime in Russia suddenly collapsed! The many horrors of communism, its sudden end, and the subsequent spiritual revival in Russia were predicted by several of the last elders of the Optina monastery and by other righteous men of pre-Revolutionary Russia. (The Elder Anatoly (Potapov, 1922), the monk-priest Aristokly of Moscow (1918), the Elder Alexis (Zasimovsky), the Elder Nektary, and others. Another important detail in the predictions of these Elders is that these events in Russia were to occur close to the end of the world, although they did not specify any exact time frame for these events. Nevertheless, many current world processes such as the overpopulation of our planet, the catastrophic pollution of the environment, the depletion of the earth's resources, and the fulfillment of many prophecies of Holy Scripture hint that the last days of our world may truly be not so far away.

About two thousand years ago, when our Lord Jesus Christ cast out evil spirits, they often cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus the Son of God? You came ahead of time to torment us!" Amazingly, nowadays during attempts at exorcism, the evil spirits cry out quite different words, like, "Leave us, for the Lord is coming soon anyway!" This hints at the fact that they know about the end of the world better than we do! (We find a reference to this by Dr. Kurt Koch, a Protestant scholar who wrote several important books in the area of demonology, parapsychology and false miracles. See, for example, his books "Between Christ and Satan," "Occult Bondage and Deliverance," "Demonology Past and Present." Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In this article we will speak about the main characteristics of the approach of the end of the world and some features of the Antichrist's personality, and we will describe the Second Coming of Christ, the Resurrection of the Dead, the Last (or Universal) Judgment and eternal life, as taught in the Scriptures. In the conclusion we will stress the importance of being prepared to meet the Lord. In the supplement we will show the inconsistency of the sectarian teaching known as Chiliasm about the thousand-year kingdom.

Awaiting the Second Coming

THE MAIN PURPOSE of our earthly existence is to prepare for eternity. Christian wisdom dictates that the precious gift of time be exploited to its maximum in order to inherit eternal life. Our Lord Jesus Christ in His many sermons called upon His followers to value time and to live in constant readiness to give account of our life: "*Watch therefore, for or you do not know at what hour your Lord is coming*" (Mt. 24:42). See also the description of the Last Judgment in Mt. 25:31-46; the parables of the Lord about the wheat and the chaff (Mt. 13:4-9), about the workers awaiting for their master to come (Lk. 12:35-40), about the unjust steward (Lk. 16:1-13), about the great supper (Lk. 14:16-24), about the talents (Mt. 25:14-30), about the workers in the vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16), about the ten virgins (Mt. 25:1-13) and other sermons. Although most people fear death and avoid thinking about it, the apostles instruct Christians to meditate often about the impending meeting with the Lord because such thoughts lead them to a more alert and pious way of life. "*Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near,*" wrote the Apostle James. "*Behold, the Judge is standing at the door*" (James 5:8-9).

From the ancient Christian writings we conclude that the majority of the early Christians anxiously awaited the return to earth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Their expectations were supported, on the one hand, by the atmosphere of constant persecutions and martyrdom which surrounded them. The intensity of these persecutions reminded the Christians of the Savior's predictions about the last days. No one could guarantee even a single day of safe existence. It is sufficient to remember the examples of the first martyr deacon Stephen, of the apostles Peter and Paul, the young sisters Faith, Hope and Charity, and their mother Sophia, the great martyr Barbara, the victorious Saint

George, and other innumerable martyrs of the early Christian period in order to ascertain that the lives of believers in that early period were in constant peril. In Roman emperors like Nero, Domitian, Dacius, Diocletian, and similar persecutors, Christians saw features in common with the apocalyptic beast. On the other hand, many Christians of the early period had such a burning faith and diligence towards a righteous life that the Second Coming of Christ was not regarded as a time of judgment and punishment but as a joyous meeting with their beloved Savior. They truly wished for the swift return of Christ.

With the end of persecutions and paganism in the beginning of the 4th Century, the faith of Christians began to cool, and with this the expectations of the Second Coming of Christ became more serene and relaxed. A systematic study of the Scriptures convinced theologians that prior to the great Day of the Lord a series of significant spiritual processes and social changes must happen.

Signs of the Second Coming

ALTHOUGH HOLY SCRIPTURE does not reveal any dates, it indicates a series of signs by which one can infer the relative closeness of the Second Coming of Christ. In concluding His sermon about the end of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ said: *"Now learn this parable of the fig tree. When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near; at the very doors!"* In other words, observe events because they will give hints to you about how close the end of the world is (Mt. 24:32-34). In several of the sermons of Christ and in the preaching of the Apostles, we find the following signs of the Second Coming of Christ:

- a) a) Global spread of the Gospel. Jesus Christ foretold that all nations will have the opportunity to believe in Him: *"The Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world as a witness unto all nations; and then the end shall come"* (Mt. 24:14).
- b) Extreme weakening of the faith. Although Christ's teaching will be generally known, people will become indifferent to it, so much so that *"when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"* (Lk. 18:8). According to Saint Paul, this will be the time *"when people will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires they will choose teachers who will tell them just what they want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and go after fables"* (2 Tim. 4:3-4). In other words, close to the end of the world people will become very cynical about Divinely revealed truths and absolute moral values. They will only listen to what sounds interesting or pleasing. This attitude will promote
- c) The appearance of many false prophets and false messiahs. These deceiving teachers will entice people to join all kinds of sects and wild cults catering to the low moral standards of the crowd. The Lord warns us about the danger of false teachings, saying: *"Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying I am Christ; and shall deceive many. Do not follow them. For false Christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand"* (Mt. 24:5, 24; Mk. 13:6). The book of Revelation describes some of the striking miracles of the last and ultimate false prophet and promoter of the Antichrist. The Apostle Paul explains to the Thessalonians that these will be not actual miracles but mere illusions and deceptions of the evil spirits (Rev. 13:13-15, 2 Thes. 2:9).
- d) The turning to Christ of the Jewish people. As St. Paul predicts, the mass falling away from Christianity of many nations will coincide with the conversion of Jews to Christ: *"For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob' ... Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways paths beyond tracking out!"* (Romans 11:25-33).
- e) Evil and lawlessness will increase greatly. As our Lord predicted: *"Because iniquity will abound, the love of many will grow cold"* (Mt. 24:12). The weakening of faith will lead to further moral decline and in turn, as in a chain reaction, that will weaken faith even more. In the following gloomy picture the Apostle Paul depicts the general moral decay prior to the end of the world: *"In the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power"* (2 Tim 3:1-5).

From the combined predictions of Holy Scripture, it should be concluded that by the end of the world carnal desires and passions will suppress all noble and spiritual aspirations in people. Interest in Christ will cease, His teachings will be neglected and ridiculed, and everything related to Christianity - its customs and traditions, Church architecture and music, Christian feast days - will be considered ancient history. The general mood will be reminiscent of ante-deluvian times described in the book of Genesis: *"And the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart ... for the earth is filled with violence through them"* (Gen. 6:5-11). Similar conditions will prevail before the Second Coming of Christ.

- f) Sorcery, the serving of evil spirits, and other pagan practices will become widespread. The minds of most people will be poisoned by all sorts of ungodly heresies, as the Holy Spirit expressly predicted through St. Paul: *"In latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons"* (1 Tim. 4:1). The Apostle John depicts the following gloomy picture about the overwhelming permeation of evil spirits into people's lives: *"And he [the Angel] opened the bottomless pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace. So the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the pit ... And they [the locusts which came from the pit] had as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, but in Greek he has the name Apollyon."* Even though the Lord, by means of different punishments and calamities, will try to stop people from doing evil, they "would not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts" (Rev. 9:2-21, 16:13, 18:23). As mutual enmity and hatred grow,
- g) Persecution of the faithful will escalate. Christians will be hated by people who reject any mentioning of God's authority and who trust only in the power of their intellect. And as believing in God becomes unpopular, any Christian wishing to retain his faith will feel more and more isolated from society. He will discover that even his own relatives have become his enemies, as the Lord predicted: *"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake; and then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another."* So that even *"brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake ... But he who endures to the end shall be saved"* (Mt. 24:9-10; Mrk. 13:12-13; Lk. 21:18). The general moral decay and hatred will produce
- h) Destabilization the very foundations of the social life. Bloody wars and various disasters will reach catastrophic proportions. People will become weary from the burden of suffering from disasters. They will be unable to overcome them through personal efforts; however, they will not turn to God for help due to their own disbelief. *"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilence, and earthquakes in various places."* But people will become so hardened that even these calamities will not turn them to repentance. Ever increasing licentiousness, hatred, and mutual enmity will ultimately lead to the Last Judgment. Comparing the last times with the time before the deluge the Apostle Peter says: *"As God did not spare the ancient world [in the time of Noah] bringing in the flood on the ungodly ... and [later] turned the cities of Sodom and Gomorra into ashes, then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment"* (2 Pet. 2:5-9). *"And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; and men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken"* (Mt. ch. 24; Mrk. ch. 13 and Lk. ch. 21). The concluding words of this prophecy evidently pertain to the end of the world. However, a few years prior to this, a more fearful event in the life of mankind will occur: the coming to power of the Antichrist.

The Antichrist

IN HOLY SCRIPTURE the term antichrist has a twofold meaning. In a broad and general sense this word indicates every person hostile to Christ's teaching (the Greek prefix anti signifies against). This is the meaning St. John the Theologian used to speak of many antichrists in his epistles. In a particular sense the name Antichrist signifies a definite person - the leading adversary of Christ who is to appear before the end of the world. The appearance of this definite Antichrist on the world scene constitutes the final and decisive sign that the Second Coming of Christ is at hand.

All the growing aversion towards God on the part of mankind close to the end of the world will become, so to speak, concentrated in this definite man of sin, who will lead the final desperate battle against Christianity. Of the characteristics and actions of this Antichrist, we read in St. Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians: *"Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God ... And now you know what is restraining (Divine Grace and Providence), which does not allow his appearance. that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness"* (2 Thes. 2:3-11).

A number of external factors will have to play a significant role in strengthening the power of the coming Antichrist. Possibly, during his time the threat of nuclear and biological warfare, or the specter of a horrible political and economic crisis will hang over mankind. Governments will be on the verge of collapse, and nations in turmoil and revolt. Then, on the murky waters of a global cataclysm, a "brilliant" leader will surface as the sole savior of mankind. Backing him will be a formidable organization with the goal of global domination. With its support the Antichrist will emerge with a prepared program of socio-economic reforms, which will be actively supported and advocated by the mass media. What will be the secret of the Antichrist's persuasive power and his ability to direct world events? We can envision him as a gifted and inflammatory orator, like Lenin or Hitler. His ideas and propositions will be readily accepted because they will express the thoughts and feelings of the masses of his materialistic epoch.

One would think that many Jews, opposed to Christianity, will see in the Antichrist their long-awaited Messiah, while the majority of people will be inspired by hopes that he will put an end to wars and crises and will bring about a general prosperity. Having in mind such a blindness among people who fail to see the catastrophe hanging over their heads, St. Paul wrote: *"For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape"* (1 Thes. 5:1-6).

The Antichrist will not be content with mere political authority and outward transformations. Praised by all, he will become so conceited that he will regard himself as a superhuman endowed with divine power. He will proclaim a new world-view - a new religion and new morality in place of "outmoded" and "unsuccessful" Christian teaching. Possessed by delusions of grandeur, he will present himself as God and sit in the temple, (possibly in Jerusalem's temple rebuilt where the King Solomon's temple) used to be demanding divine worship.

According to St. Paul, the activities of the Antichrist will be extremely successful, being supported by Satan, and accompanied by lying signs, false miracles, and all kinds of unrighteous deception of the perishing. By signs and miracles of the Antichrist we should understand not only the deceptive tricks aimed to delight the crowd but also the highest accomplishments of science, which will be exploited to strengthen his rule (According to Rev. 13:15, the false prophet had the "power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.") The most sophisticated form of surveillance on people will be used to control their activities. Those wishing to buy or to sell anything will have to present official permission to do so (According to Rev. 13:17, "no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.") Radio, TV programs, and the press will strive to shape the most favorable image of the world Leader in order to strengthen his political power and admiration among people. Any person daring to question the genius of this Leader, or disagreeing with his measures, will be ridiculed, persecuted, and ultimately destroyed as a public enemy.

An image of the coming Antichrist is portrayed by the prophet Daniel in the appearance of a minor horn. Here the prophet describes the characteristics of the Syrian King Antioch Epiphanos - the cruel persecutor of the faithful Jews about 175-164 BC - as a prototype of the Antichrist. In the book of Revelation, the Antichrist is depicted as a beast,

coming out of the sea. Some of the characteristics of this monster remind us of the Roman emperors Nero and Domitian, fierce persecutors of Christians in the first century AD. These emperors were contemporaries of St. John who wrote the book of Revelation. To avoid confusion, one should bear in mind that in the book of Revelation the term beast applies not only to the personal Antichrist but also to the whole governmental machine of his anti-Christian empire (Daniel 7:11 and the first 2 books of Maccabees; Rev. ch 13, 19:19-21).

The distinctive features, personality and mode of operation of the Antichrist are described by St. Cyrill of Jerusalem in his Catechetical Letters (5 and 15) and by St. Ephraim the Syrian in his Homily on the Coming of the Lord and the Antichrist. The famous Russian philosopher Vladimir S. Soloviev attempted to depict the coming of the Antichrist in his Tale of the Antichrist, but his representation and occasionally joking style do not convey all the horror and utter gloom which will threaten mankind in its final period of existence. His tale is a naive idyll when compared to the horror which will dominate people who have lost God. Studying the historical prototypes of the coming Antichrist, like the king Antioch Epithanos, emperors Nero and Domitian, Lenin and similar "genius" rulers, certain general traits come to mind. All of them in general were worthless people, both in the intellectual and the governmental arena. They came to power not because of their exceptional talents or achievements but because of favorable circumstances. They were more conspirators than governors. All of them suffered from disproportionate delusions of grandeur; in their personal lives they were liars, immoral and cruel. One may speculate that the final world Leader will be distinguished by similar traits.

If we take literally the time indicated by Holy Scripture regarding the rule of the beast, the activity of the Antichrist will last for about 3 1/2 years. It will end with the Second Coming of Christ, the General Resurrection of the Dead, and the Last Judgment (Daniel 7:25; Rev. 11:2-3, 12:13, 13:5). The Revelation of St. John mentions the appearance of two witnesses, who will proclaim the truth, perform miracles, and, upon completion of their witness, be killed by the Antichrist. These witnesses have been foreseen by some Fathers of the Church to be the two righteous of the Old Testament period - the patriarch Enoch (Gen. 6:23) and the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) - because only these two men did not die but were taken alive to Heaven. Presumably they will have to return to earth to complete their earthly mission, to suffer for the Word of God and to die as all mortals should.

In summary, such is the teaching of the Word of God about the approaching times, and the behavior and sentiments of the people prior to the Second Coming of Christ. Although these signs are overt and clear, the ability to see and realize them nevertheless will depend on a person's spiritual keenness. Most people, preoccupied with their material well being, will be incapable of understanding what is happening before their eyes, or the point toward which the world is headed. For this reason the Savior warned His disciples: *"Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth"* (Lk. 21:34-36).

The Second Coming

THE SPIRITUAL GAZE of Christians should be focused upon the approaching joyous event - the Second Coming of Christ on earth: *"And when these things [the sorrows of the last days] begin to come to pass then look up and lift up your heads, for your redemption draws near"* (Lk 21:28). The reality of His coming again was witnessed to by the Savior Himself, with the indication of some details, and was proclaimed by the Angels during the Lord's Ascension, and often reminders were given by the Apostles (Mt. 16:27; Mt. ch 24; Mk. 8:38; Lk 12:40 and 17:24; John. 14:3; Acts. 1:11; Jude 14-15; 1 John 2:28; 1 Pet. 4:13; 1 Cor. 4:5; 1 Thes. 5:2-6 and other places). The Lord described His Second Coming as being sudden and obvious to all: *"For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west; so also will the coming of the Son of Man be."* Prior to this, the *"sign of the Son of Man will appear in Heaven,"* and having seen it, *"all the peoples of the world will mourn"* (Mt. 24:30). According to the Fathers of the Church, this will be the sign of the saving Cross of our Lord.

The Lord will descend in all His glory surrounded by innumerable angels: *"Then they will see the Son of Man, coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, and all His angels with Him ... Then He will sit on the throne of His glory..."* (Mt. 24:30, 25:31, Mk. 13:26). From these words we should conclude that the Second Coming of Christ will look substantially different from the first one, during which He willingly humbled Himself and came in the semblance of an ordinary man. Then He lived in poverty and voluntarily suffered all kinds of

humiliations. His Second Coming will also differ in purpose. First He came to give His soul for the salvation of many; then He will come to judge the world and recompense everyone according to his deeds. (Acts 17:31; Mt. 24:27).

The Resurrection of the Dead

ON THE GREAT DAY of the Second Coming of the Son of Man, the General Resurrection of the Dead will occur. All people will rise from their graves in a transformed state. The Lord thus describes this event: *"Do not marvel at this: for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice [of the Son of God] and come forth; those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation"* (John 5:29).

When the Sadducees expressed doubt as to the possibility of physical resurrection, the Lord reproached them, saying: *"You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God"* (Mt. 22:29). The Apostle Paul expressed the importance of faith in the resurrection in these words: *"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty ... For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive"* (1 Cor. 15:13-22).

The Resurrection of the Dead will be general and simultaneous for both the righteous and sinners: *"And shall come forth - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil to the resurrection of condemnation"* (John 5:29; Acts. 24:15). But the appearance of the resurrected righteous will differ substantially from that of the resurrected sinners: *"Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father"* (Mt. 13:43), said the Lord of the saved. Commenting on these words of the Savior, St. Ephraim the Syrian says that *"the ones will resemble light, while the others will resemble darkness."*

Carefully analyzing what the Scriptures teach regarding the General Resurrection, one must conclude that the resurrected bodies in their essence will remain the same as they were during their earlier existence: *"For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality"* (1 Cor 15:53). But they will rise up transfigured and will become imperishable and immortal. After resurrection they will be absolutely free from physical exhaustion and from any weaknesses of our present life. They will become spiritual and heavenly, free from any physical needs. Life after resurrection will resemble the lives of the bodiless angels. As to sinners, their bodies will also, undoubtedly, arise in a transformed state; however, having received immortality, they will at the same time reflect in themselves all the hideousness of their moral decay.

To strengthen the faith in Christians regarding the forthcoming transfiguration of bodies, St. Paul refers to a generally known fact: *"Someone may doubt - 'How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?' - Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain; perhaps wheat or some other grain. But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed it's own body"* (1 Cor. 15:35-38). Supporting the same idea, the Fathers of the Church point out the fact that in reality nothing is ever destroyed nor disappears, rather it is transformed into something with new properties, and certainly God has power to restore and transform everything that He created. Turning to nature, they found in it many similarities to resurrection, such as: the germination of plants from a seed, buried into the earth and decayed; the annual renewal of nature during the Spring; waking from sleep with renewed energies; the initial formation of man from the dust; and other similar phenomena.

Those people who will be living on earth during the Second Coming of the Lord, according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, will undergo instantaneous transformation similar to the one which will occur to those who were dead: *"Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed; in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality"* (1 Cor. 15:51-53).

Regarding the meeting of the faithful with the Lord, which will occur after this, St. Paul says: "*I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord*" (1 Thes. 4:13-1).

A widespread error among contemporary Protestants is that of the rapture. Unheard of before the 19th century, this belief has it that during the "great tribulation" near the end of the world (either before or after the millennium, according to various versions), true Christians will be raptured into the air to escape the sufferings of those who remain on earth. It is based on the misinterpretation of 1 Thes. 4:17, which teaches that at the very end of the world believers will be caught up in the clouds together with the resurrected dead to meet the Lord Who is coming for judgment and the opening of the eternal Kingdom of Heaven. The Scripture is quite clear that even the elect will suffer on earth during the tribulation period and that for their sake this time will be shortened (Mat. 24:21-22).

In speaking about the Resurrection and everything that will follow it, we should remember that these are events which we are neither able to fully comprehend, nor imagine, as nothing of this nature was ever experienced by us. For this reason, we never will be able to solve all the related questions which often arise in inquisitive people's minds.

The End of the Physical World

As a result of mankind's fall into sin, all creation unwillingly submitted to "*the slavery of decay, and groans and suffers till now*" (Rom. 8:22). The time will come in which mankind and the entire material world will be purified and renewed. This will occur on the last day, following the Universal Judgment, and it will happen by means of fire. As the world that existed before the deluge was purified from sin by means of the flood, likewise "the present heaven and earth," St. Peter teaches, "*are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men ... [On that] day ... the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up ... Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*" (2 Pet. 3:7-13).

The fact that the present temporary world will be transformed was predicted many centuries before Christ by the Psalmist who said: "Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; Yes, all of them will grow old like a garment; Like a cloak You will change them, And they will be changed. But You are the same, And Your years will have no end" (Ps. 102:25-27). In other words, the end of the world will not be its destruction but its total renewal.

Universal Judgment

AMONG NUMEROUS testimonies of the future Judgment, the most complete description of it we find in the Gospel of St. Matthew, 25:31-46: "*When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left ...*" See also: John 5:22-29; Mt. 16:27, 7:21-23, 11:22-24, 12:35-42, 13:37-43, 19:29-30, 25:31-46, Acts. 17:31, Jude 14-15, 2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 2:5-7, 14:10; 1 Cor. 4:5; Eph. 6:8; Col. 3:24-25; 2 Thes. 1:6-10; 2 Tim. 4:1, Rev. 20:11-15).

Through this pattern in Matthew one can learn about some particulars of the Last Judgment, namely, that it will be universal, extending to all peoples - both living and dead, of both good and evil - and will extend to fallen angels as well, as inferred by other scriptural indications. This Judgment will be solemn and open, as the Judge will appear before the face of the whole world in His Divine glory, surrounded by innumerable Angels. It will be stern and fearful, being accomplished in the entirety of God's justice, and it will be "*the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God*" (Rom. 2:5). It will be final and decisive, determining for eternity the fate of each

individual. Its results will be perpetual retribution - either blessedness and bliss for the righteous, or rejection and torment for the condemned sinners.

Portraying in the brightest and most joyful details the eternal life of the righteous following the Universal Judgment, the Word of God speaks just as emphatically and assuredly about the eternal torment of sinners: "*Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels,*" will say the Lord on the day of Judgment. "*And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life*" (Mt. 25:41-46).

The place where sinners will be condemned after the Judgment is graphically represented in Holy Scripture as a place of horrible sufferings from unquenchable fire and the undying worm. The Lord called this place Gehenna, reminding the Jews of the dreadful valley to the south of Jerusalem in which evildoers were executed and in which the city's rubbish was constantly burnt. Similarly, St. Paul speaks of the "*flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Thes. 1:8). In the book of Revelation this place of eternal sufferings is called the "lake of fire" (Rev. 19:20). Evidently these and other similar vivid descriptions in the Scripture symbolically portray the severity of the punishments.

"I know," writes St. John Chrysostom, "that many are terrified of Gehenna, but I think that the deprivation of the bliss of God's Kingdom is the worst of torments, even worse than Gehenna ... Many foolish people desire only to be delivered from Gehenna, but I think that he who is deprived of the Kingdom of Heaven should weep not so much over the torments of Gehenna as over being deprived of the good things of Heaven. For this alone is the cruelest of all punishments" (Homily 25 on Matthew and Homily 1 to Theodore).

Some ancient heretics (like the followers of Origen) claimed that demons and sinners will suffer in hell only up to a certain period and later will be restored to their previous pure state. This doctrine is known as Apokatastasis. However, the Church, basing itself on God's word, teaches that the torments of Gehenna will be eternal and unending. The Fathers of the Fifth Ecumenical Council officially rejected the false teaching of Apokatastasis. Attempts to understand the torments of Gehenna in the relative sense of a certain period, perhaps lengthy but finite, reappear from time to time. Some sectarians go as far as to entirely deny the reality of infernal torments. In support of their views they bring logical considerations like the disharmony between torments in hell and God's infinite love, the seeming discrepancy between temporary misdeeds and eternal punishments, or the discrepancy of these punishments with the ultimate purpose of the creation of mankind, which is blessedness in God.

In considering these and similar arguments we should remember that it is not for us to determine the boundaries between the unutterable mercy of God and His absolute justice. We know the Lord "wishes that all will be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth." However, man, through his own free will, is capable of rejecting God's mercy and all His means of salvation. St. John Chrysostom, explaining the depiction of the Last Judgment in the Gospel of Matthew, remarks: "When the Lord spoke of the Kingdom, He said: "Come you blessed ones, inherit the Kingdom," and added, "Which was prepared for you from the beginning of creation. "But when He spoke of the fire, He didn't use the same words; instead He said that it was prepared for the devil and his angels. Thus He made the Kingdom for you, but the fire not for you, but for the devil and his fallen angels." (From the sermon on the gospel of Matthew). In the book of Revelation St. John calls the condemnation at the Universal Judgment the second death.

We do not have the right to take the Lord's words as only a threat or as a certain pedagogical method used for the rehabilitation of sinners. Bishop Theophan the Recluse explains: "The righteous will enter eternal life, and the satanized sinners into eternal punishment in community with the demons. Will these torments end? If Satanism and becoming like Satan will end, then torments may end too. But is there an end to Satanism and becoming like Satan? We will behold and see this then. But until then we shall believe that just as eternal life will have no end, so eternal torment that threatens sinners will also have no end. What did Satan not see after his fall! How he himself was struck by the power of the Lord's Cross! How up to now all his cunningness and malice are defeated by this power! But still he is incorrigible; he constantly opposes; and the farther he goes, the more stubborn he becomes. No, there is no hope at all for him to be corrected! ... This means that there must be hell with eternal torments."

However, the concept of anger in relation to God is conditional and pictorial, as we learn from the teachings of Blessed Anthony the Great. He says: "God is benevolent, dispassionate and unchangeable. Now some who think it

reasonable to affirm that God does not change may well ask how in that case it is possible to speak of God as rejoicing over the righteous and showing mercy to those who honor Him, while He rejects the evil doers, is angry at sinners, and when they repent He shows them mercy. To this one should say that in reality God neither rejoices nor grows angry, as gladness and anger are human passions. It is improper to think of God as becoming good or bad on account of a human's deeds. God is good and only does good. He does not harm anyone, and always remains the same. And we, when we are kind, enter into communion with God, due to likeness with Him, and when we become evil, then we move away from Him due to unlikeness with him ... Therefore, to say God turns away from evildoers is the same as to say that the sun hides itself from the blind" (Philokalia v. 1).

Many writings of Christian ascetics explain that the higher someone rises morally, the keener he recognizes his responsibility before God and the stronger his hope for God's mercy and love towards Him.

Kingdom of Glory

With the transformation of this world into a new and better one, the eternal Kingdom of God will begin. Then the earthly Kingdom of Grace - the militant Church on earth, to which we belong - will merge with its heavenly counterpart - the Kingdom of Glory. Then the Son of God will reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and "His Kingdom shall have no end," as the Angel Gabriel proclaimed to the Virgin Mary (Lk. 1:33). . Cyril of Jerusalem comments about this, saying: "For will not He who reigned before overthrowing His enemies, reign all the more after He has conquered them?" (Cathetical Lectures).

Then death will lose all its power over the righteous: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death ... So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory," states St. Paul (1 Cor. 15:26 and 54). The book of Revelation predicts that then time will cease to exist. Apparently in that eternal spiritual world not only will the sensation of the flow of time disappear, but also the very concepts of space and time will be drastically different from what they are now.

Chapter 21 of the book of Revelation vividly depicts the blissful state of eternal life: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, as the previous heaven and earth have gone, and the sea is no more." In the Kingdom of Glory all will be spiritual, immortal, and holy. Most importantly, those attaining eternity in communion with God will become partakers of that perfect union with Him Who is the ultimate Source of all life and happiness. In particular, the new members of God's Kingdom share with the Angels the honor and happiness of seeing their Creator and Benefactor. They will contemplate His glory, not as if through dim glass, not conjecturally, but face to face - and not only contemplate but also partake in His Divine Life, shining like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. They will become co-heirs with Christ and will share with Him His glory (Rev. 3:21; 2 Tim. 2:11-12). As the book of Revelation describes: "they shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." It will be as the prophet Isaiah summarizes: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (Rev. 7:16-17; Is. 64:4; 1 Cor. 2:9).

Blessedness in God will be more desirable in that it will have no end: "and the righteous will enter life eternal." Nevertheless, according to the Fathers of the Church, even glory in God has its levels proportional to the spiritual level of each person. This belief is based on the following explicit statements of Holy Scripture: "In my Father's house are many mansions ... God will give to everyone according to his deeds ... There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory" (Is. 64:4; 1 Cor. 2:9; John 14. 2, Mt. 16:27, 1 Cor. 3:8, 15:41).

St. Ephrem the Syrian explains this as follows: "Just as everyone enjoys the rays of the sensual sun according to the purity of his power of seeing, and just as when a lamp illuminates a large room, each ray is perceived as coming from that same source, similarly it will be in the future age: all the righteous will share inseparably of a single joy, but each in his own degree will be illumined by the single spiritual Sun, and to the degree of his worth he will draw in joy and rejoicing as if in a single atmosphere and place. No one will see the degrees that are higher or lower, lest looking on the surpassing grace of another and upon his own deprivation, he will thereby have some cause for sorrow and disturbance. This cannot be there, where there is neither sorrow nor sighing. But there everyone will

rejoice inwardly according to the grace proper to him, while outwardly all will have a single contemplation and a single joy" (Sermon On the Heavenly Mansions).

Conclusion

MANY CHRISTIANS live carelessly and even in sin because they do not take seriously enough the upcoming Universal Judgment; it seems to them a very remote and uncertain event. To improve our spiritual life, we should remind ourselves that prior to that final and ultimate Judgment there constantly occur particular Divine judgments. Indeed, throughout all of history we see cases of particular Divine judgments over individuals, places, and even whole nations. Vivid examples of this are the global deluge at the time of Noah, the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, the repeated ravages of Israel, the fall of ancient Assyria and Babylon, the sudden destruction of the immoral Pompeii, and the fall of the Roman Empire and other mighty kingdoms. Even large Christian nations such as Byzantium and Russia did not escape God's judgment when their people deviated from the Christian life. It always happens as Jesus explained about the particular judgment: "wherever there appears a carcass [moral decay], there will the eagles be gathered together" (Matt. 24:28).

In order to forewarn us about moral decay and inspire us to renew our spiritual life, the Savior kindly warned us: "Be prepared, for in the hour which you don't expect, the Son of Man will come." Therefore, we should be attentive to our spiritual state. We should strive that the lamp of our faith does not stop shining and that the garment of the soul remains clean. Then the coming of Christ on earth will become a desirable event, as it was for the Christians in apostolic times. This Second Coming will be perceived as the end to all wrongdoing, crimes, and calamities and the beginning of a new life in the renewed world.

Among the already fulfilled signs of the end of the world we should mention: a) the spread of the Gospel message over the whole globe; b) the intensifying process of moving away from the faith by peoples who were Christians from the early centuries; c) the beginning of the return to Jesus Christ of many Jews; d) the increasing number of false prophets and wild cults and; e) the fall of moral standards, with the increase of horrible crimes, witchcraft, and Satanism.

As to the contemporary decrease of moral standards, we know that people were always sinful to a larger or smaller degree. But in the past they used to recognize their wrongdoing and attempted to correct it. A peculiarity of our time is that sinful deeds are declared to be acceptable and even raised on a pedestal. For example, supporters of abortion and groups of homosexuals organize mass demonstrations and demand special rights for themselves. Gazing at them, one remembers the words the Prophet Isaiah said before the destruction of Jerusalem: "The look on their countenance witnesses against them, and they declare their sin as Sodom. They do not hide it. Woe to their soul! For they have brought evil upon themselves" (Is. 3:9). The other gloomy peculiarity of our time is the obtrusive intrusion of all kinds of depravities and vulgarities in those spheres of life which traditionally were expressions of the most bright and noble aspects of mankind's spirit - music, art, and literature. Evaluate from the Christian standpoint popular rock music and heavy metal, full of cacophony and crude and voluptuous yelling; some modern ugly paintings and sculptures; and the many movies full of violence and vulgarity. And with alarm we observe how the growing spiritual void in people is being filled by a dark alien force, which is leaving its imprint upon the affairs of daily life and even the appearance of people.

Seeing all these foretold signs, we still cannot predict the exact time at which the world will end. Nevertheless, it may not be very far away. Predictions by our Optina elders and other pre-Revolutionary righteous people of Russia give us reason to think that with the downfall of communism and the beginning of spiritual rebirth in Russia, the next to the last page of world history has been turned, following which will be the coming of the Antichrist and the fulfillment of the predictions in the book of Revelation.

May the merciful Lord guide and protect all of us in the coming times of trial. Amen!

Addendum: The Inconsistency of Chiliasm

THERE IS PRESENTLY a teaching about the thousand-year kingdom of Christ on earth prior to the Universal Judgment that is gaining increased acceptance among different Christian denominations. This teaching is known as Chiliasm, from the Greek chiliasmós, meaning "a thousand years." The essence of this teaching is as follows: Long before the end of the world, Christ will once again return to earth, defeat the Antichrist, resurrect the righteous only, and establish a kingdom on earth in which the righteous, as a reward for their struggles and sufferings, will reign with Him for a period of thousand years, enjoying all the good things of temporal life. After this, another resurrection will follow in which the rest of the people will be raised from the dead. Then the Universal Judgment will take place, and God will reward the righteous and punish the sinners. The defenders of this teaching base their arguments on the vision of the Apostle John in the 20th chapter of the book of Revelation.

There it is said that an Angel descended from heaven and bound Satan for a thousand years and that the souls of those beheaded for their witness of Jesus Christ and the word of God came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. "This is the first resurrection," says the book of Revelation (Rev. 20:5). "When the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations" (Rev. 20:7-8). Soon there follows the judgment of the devil and of those who were deceived by him. The dead will be raised up and judged according to their deeds. "... And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire ... This is the second death" (Rev. 20:14-15). Upon those who have been resurrected in the first resurrection, however, the second death will have no power.

Chiliasm views in antiquity were spread chiefly among heretics. The Second Ecumenical Council in 381 AD, condemning the heretic Apollinarius, condemned his teaching about the thousand-year Kingdom of Christ. To put a stop to further attempts at introducing this teaching, the Fathers of the Council inserted into the Creed the words about Christ: "His Kingdom shall have no end." In other words, when Christ's reign begins there will be no interruptions in His eternal Kingdom. In more recent times, chiliasm views were resurrected in some Protestant groups. As has been indicated, in this teaching there are proposed two future resurrections and two judgments: one for the righteous and later another for sinners; and there are two future comings of the Savior. There is a purely earthly reign of Christ with the righteous ones as a definite historical epoch. Formally, this teaching is based on an incorrect understanding of the expression first resurrection, while inwardly its cause is rooted in many contemporary sectarians' loss of faith in eternal life and in the blessedness of the righteous in Heaven, with whom they have no communion in prayer. Another cause is to be found in utopian dreams hidden behind religious ideas and inserted into the mysterious images of the book of Revelation.

It is not difficult to see the inconsistency of the chiliasm interpretation of the 20th Chapter of the book of Revelation. Parallel passages in Sacred Scripture clearly indicate that the first resurrection signifies spiritual rebirth into eternal life through baptism. Here are some typical passages in apostolic epistles: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light ... You are risen with Christ" (Eph 5:14; Col. 3:1 and 2:12; Eph. 2:5-6). Proceeding from this, by the thousand-year reign we must understand the period of time from the very beginning of the Church of Christ until the end of the world. In the 20th chapter of Revelation, St. John consoles the faithful with the thought that those who were killed for Christ did not perish. Instead, they reign in Heaven with their Savior.

The second death signifies the condemnation of sinners after the Universal Judgment. It does not concern "the resurrected in the first resurrection." This means that those spiritually regenerated in Christ and cleansed by God's grace will not be subject to Condemnation but will enter the blessed life of Christ's Kingdom.

"It is important to understand that the 20th chapter of the book of Revelation does not introduce any new teaching about the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ. Its purpose is to summarize the battle between the devil and the Church which permeates the whole history of mankind. The devil is defeated twice: first spiritually, by the redemptive death of the Savior, and at the end of the world, completely and finally, when he will be thrown into the lake of fire. Christian martyrs began to celebrate their victory over Satan immediately following their death for Christ.

Missionary Leaflet # E47
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