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Count the Number of the Beast: 666

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In the Apocalypse, the holy Apostle John the Theologian indicated the number of Antichrist in these words: And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their forehead... Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred threescore and six (Rev. 13:16, 18). Ever since then, there have been many interpretations of this number. In their exegeses the Holy Fathers have proceeded from the fact that the number of the beast [i.e., Antichrist] is the number of his name, as it says in verse 17: ...the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. During the time of Antichrist, everyone will be offered to receive the mark of the beast, and therefore Christians ought to know the essence of what this means and just what this number signifies.

On this subject, a majority of Christians today fall into one of two basic categories. To the first belong those who are altogether indifferent to this question, who consider it to be of little import and who even laugh at those who are interested in it. It would appear that such apathy, such a lukewarm attitude, reflects a shallow, superficial faith. In the second group are those Christians who, possessing "zeal without knowledge," are led astray by the enemy into overly literal interpretations, finding the number of Antichrist in trademarks, in documents and on currency - an extreme approach that frequently leads to the development of a pharisaical-sectarian spirit.

What is the genuinely Orthodox approach to this subject? We shall try to explain. The Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church allow of various explanations of the number of the beast. Most often the name is sought in the correspondence between the number of the beast and the sum of letters of this or that name. Thereby people have arrived at many descriptive and even proper names of Antichrist, and likewise his title. They have deduced such names as "Wicked Leader," "Ancient Envier," "Truly Malicious," "Unrighteous Lamb," and others.

Doubtless, any descriptive names corresponding to the number 666 can, of course, be applied to Antichrist. However, we must direct our attention not to an external search for names, but to ascertaining the inner meaning of the name of the beast. After all, the Apostle John the Theologian indicated specifically that in order to comprehend the name of the beast it was essential to have wisdom, i.e., Christian love of wisdom, and not simply an arithmetical formula.

We know that Divine names - as, for example, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, and others - can contain a condensed form of the entire Christian confession. The hesychast fathers often point this out in speaking about the Jesus Prayer. Antichrist, in seeking to counterfeit Christ in all respects, will also have a name that expresses, in condensed form, his entire false teaching. The name of Antichrist will be a kind of brief but precise symbol of the antichristian faith. It will contain in itself all the fundamental theses of this false teaching. Only in this way can one explain how the acceptance of the inscription of this name, the mark of the beast, will be a denial of Christ and His Church.

It is this denial of true Christianity that constitutes the principal reason for setting the seal of Antichrist. Clearly, then, the acceptance of this seal is not connected to any trademarks or commercial marks on documents, money or even on the flesh (for example, prisoners in labor camps wear

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numbers on their clothing, and slaves used to be branded). This is not the seal of Antichrist. The acceptance of the mark must be joined with a conscious denial of Christ and the acceptance of the law of Antichrist.

It is interesting to trace how, over thousands of years, Satan has been preparing mankind to accept his religion. Many pagan cults confess some kind of divine triad. The ancient Romans had Jupiter, Juno and Minerva; the Hindus have Brahma, Siva and Visnu; in the Egyptian religion one finds the trinitarian group of Osiris, Isis, and Horus. The concept of a trinity also exists in Buddhism and among the ancient Slavs and Celts. In the Graeco-Roman religious cults this idea was reflected in the veneration of the three-bodied goddess Hecate, the three-headed Scylla, the triune divinities of the Cabiri. At the gate of Hades stood guard the fiendish, three-headed dog, Cerberus. Numerous divine triads have been revered by pagan tribes of the Americas and Africa. The cult of voodoo, which is related to modern satanism and still practiced today, believes in some anti-trinity.

These confessions may be said to contain fragments of true revelation. If satan did not exist, one could say that these pagan peoples revered the true God-in-Trinity, even though their concepts of just Who this is were in many ways distorted. But because the world of dark spirituality is in fact a distorted representation of the Divine world, and the devil in his actions imitates God in a distorted fashion, it follows that the distorted divinity of the pagans is a false god, endeavoring to pass for the true God. Through the lips of the Prophet David, the Church warns us that all the gods of the heathen are devils (LXX, Ps. 95:5). It is evident that, under the guise of these pagan "trinities," satan himself is concealed together with his minions. This is iconographically supported: in the Christian art of Europe and Abyssinia one finds three-headed, three-faced or three-horned depictions of satan, symbols of the satanic false trinity. Two thousand years ago, as Christianity spread throughout the world, it disarmed and bound the religion of satan, as this was manifest in numerous pagan cults. In the time of Antichrist this religion of evil will again, in one form or another, come to dominate the world.

In what will the religion of Antichrist consist? It is enigmatically expressed for us by the Apostle as the number 666. As we see, this number is composed of three sixes: six hundreds, six tens and six ones. If we turn to Holy Scripture, we see that the number six rarely figures in either the Old or New Testaments, whereas the number seven is used in the Bible as a symbol of completeness, of fulfillment, of perfection, of wholeness (often in the sense of absolute perfection). In Christ, humanity is shown an example of the fullness of the Godhead (cf. Col. 2:9). The Antichrist, by contrast, will unite in himself all incompleteness, all imperfection, and deficiency. The symbol of imperfection - that seeks to appear as perfection - is none other than the number six. In the number of the beast this imperfection is raised to its extreme: it is not merely six, but six hundred, sixty-six!

If the Son of God co-exists indivisibly and in unconfused union with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the son of perdition, Antichrist, exists in the closest possible union with satan and his false prophet. The three of them together represent a false trinity, as it were: the spirit of malice-the beast-the second beast. These three deficient persons, one in their spiritual essence, are united in a single incompleteness, whose symbol is 666. And so, the number of the name of the beast contains in condensed form the entire diabolical confession of the false religion of the Antichrist. Herein lies the evil power of this bestial name.

The "moral" teaching of satan can also be expressed as a type of triune evil: evil reasoning, evil feelings, and evil will. This anti-moral teaching can also be symbolically expressed by the name of the beast, more precisely, by the tripartite number of this name. For this reason, the acceptance of this name of Antichrist in the form of some seal will in fact be a denial of Christ and His Church.

The son of perdition, the Antichrist, inasmuch as he is a man, will give the devil the possibility - through him - to act openly in the world, and, with the help of the false prophet, to deceive and destroy people. The greater part of humanity will gladly accept this proud message of the man-god, whose principal postulates will be: "Man! Know that your 'I' is a part of the divinity. You are truly a

god! You are a law unto yourself. No one has any authority over your 'I.' An example for you is your messiah [Antichrist], a great man, who knows that he is a god!" The false religion of Antichrist can be characterized as a humanist religion, in the sense that it is not divine; it is vain, transitory. This is why the number of the beast is called in the Apocalypse, the number of a man (Rev. 13:18). The number of a man is the name of the man-Antichrist, who will reveal himself to be a god, but who in essence will be merely a pathetic slave of the fallen angel.

Let us say now a few words about that close unity of the three persons of the false-trinity. According to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, the whole life and activity of Antichrist will be connected in one way or another to satan, to whom he will be in conscious and voluntary submission. Antichrist will be close to the devil as no other person in the history of the world. He will be a real instrument of satan. In turn, the false prophet, who is called in the Scriptures the second beast, will be Antichrist's closest ally. Through Antichrist, satan will give enormous power and authority to the false prophet, who will act with all the authority of the first beast, and will compel all the earth and all those living upon the earth to bow down before him. Through the miracles that the beast will grant the false prophet to perform, the latter will deceive many, telling them to make an image to the beast (13:14): And he will be given power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should all be killed (Rev. 13:11-12, 14-15). From the second verse of the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Revelation, one can conclude that it is precisely thanks to the false prophet that many people will accept the mark of the beast. However, three and a half years later the reign of lawlessness will come to an end, for the Lord Jesus Christ will appear in glory and overwhelm all the enemies of God. And the devil will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever (Rev. 20:10).

Many people think that the seal of the Antichrist will be something like a stamp or brand, or an electronic chip implanted under the skin. The basis for such thinking lies in the fantastically rapid development of science and technology in this direction. Most likely, however, this scientific development is designed to distract mankind's attention from the real mark of Antichrist, which will have nothing to do with the advances of science, technology or medicine. At a time when people's suspicions and anxieties are fixed upon some innovation of progress-the implantation of computer chips in humans, for example-the real seal of Antichrist will be imprinted quietly, without any particular commotion.

In a spiritual sense, this satanic mystery - the imprinting of the mark of Antichrist - will be the antithesis of the Christian Mystery of Chrismation, which, we recall, is the placing of the seal of the Holy Spirit, while imitating its external form. Just as in the Mystery of Chrismation, the priest anoints the newly-illuminated on the forehead and hands, so, too, in the placing of the mark of Antichrist, his servants may well anoint people with some kind of "sacred" oil, which will symbolize the voluntary acceptance of Antichrist and his religion. The iconographic tradition of the Orthodox Church supports this supposition. In the iconographic sketch, illustrating the pouring out of God's wrath upon those bearing the mark of the beast - that is, the seal of Antichrist (Rev. 16:1,2) - we see satan wearing a fiery three-horned crown (symbolizing the trinity of evil); he is signing people on the forehead with the mark of the beast - the seal of Antichrist. Moreover, he is using a brush, dipping into a vial that he is holding in his other hand (The Illuminated Bible, 1914). Why is it that the illustration depicts satan himself placing the mark?

Because it symbolizes his spiritual presence among those numerous servants of the religion of Antichrist, who will actually place the mark upon the peoples of the earth.

Of course, the sign of Antichrist may be placed by means other than a brush - by some other "sacred" instrument or simply by the hand of a servant of the universal (Antichrist's) religion. Whatever the actual means, the aim is to induce people to renounce Christ.

Let us return now to the two groups of people whom we mentioned at the beginning of this article,

and see how they will react to the mark of the beast. It is very likely that both those who are indifferent to the question of accepting the stamp and those who zealously study marks on currency, documents and manufactured goods, endeavoring to detect the mark of Antichrist-both groups will be found outside Christ's Church. The first because, even in accepting the mark of Antichrist, they will console themselves with the thought that this is merely some innocuous, ecumenical rite. And the second, because even before the placing of the marks (or even before the coming of Antichrist), they will accuse the earthly part of Christ's Church with having accepted the mark of Antichrist, although in fact this will be simply some credit card or new type of personal document. Furthermore, such zealots "not according to knowledge" will proclaim that their group alone - which has rejected these "marks" (cards, documents, products with certain symbols, etc.) - is the true Church. Clearly, this will be nothing but a new schism or sect. Already now we find many sad examples of such splinter groups, and they will only increase in the last times.

The salvific Royal Path consists in, first: not accepting (only) those innovations of civilization that are clearly connected with the renunciation of Christ, and, secondly, not participating in any non-Orthodox rituals, for this path leads to Satan's principal ritual - the acceptance of the seal of Antichrist, i.e., the renunciation of Christ, under the guise of an outwardly innocuous, symbolical act. One must also remember that an important sign of the mark of Antichrist is that it will be made upon everyone throughout the whole world. This allows us to draw two conclusions: 1. whatever registration methods are used by individual governments are not the actual mark of Antichrist (although they may be preparatory), and 2. we must be very vigilant towards registration methods of a worldwide scale, if they in any way concern a confession of faith. Such an approach will guard us from falling into fatal extremes.

To some it may appear that keeping oneself from accepting the stamp of the Antichrist will be easy. We should not forget the warning in Scripture that in the last times even many of the chosen will be deceived, that is, many Orthodox Christians. How is this possible? It is important to understand that the principal danger lies not in the fact that this stamp will be masked and presented in the form of some technological innovation, but rather in the fact that modern, "civilized" man will be ashamed, he will be embarrassed not to accept it. This will be the greatest temptation to overcome-and many will not. Just listen to the logic: "Why do you refuse to take part in this measure that involves all of humanity, that is being instituted worldwide? After all, it symbolizes unity and the brotherly love of all peoples. It is a symbol of our unity under the aegis of a lawful global authority that has been given to all men from above. Are you against peace and order? Do you want a reign of chaos and enmity? If you are people of good will, you must take part in these cultural enactments that concern all mankind." Of course, it will turn out that one such "innocent" enactment will be, in fact, the rite of bowing down before the God-hating Antichrist. Only a discerning vigilance, illumined by the grace of God, will be able to preserve us from such subtle deception of the last times. What will be the consequences of accepting the mark of Antichrist? They will be truly horrific, destroying human souls. The fruit of denying God is always dreadful, for life without God is death.

Will one be able to repent after having accepted the mark of the beast? On the one hand, there is little hope that a person who does not have enough faith and spiritual strength to refuse the mark will be able to repudiate it once he has voluntarily accepted it. On the other hand, our attitude towards the mark of the beast must be free of all unorthodox fatalism and fetishism, for no seal or mark, in and of itself, can have any power over a man. The powers of evil behind this mark have power only over those who personally submit to them, who deny Christ. According to the Orthodox teaching, the power of Christian repentance is stronger than the power of evil. The history of the Church knows numerous examples of people who accepted the spiritual seal of satan himself, people who signed a pact with the devil, voluntarily entrusting their souls to him. And here we have a testimony of God's love for mankind: even some of these apostates repented and became saints. The Lord, by His authority, annulled their pact with satan. We have only to recall the life of Saint Cyprian, a formidable satanist who became a saint after repenting and turning to Christ.

The Orthodox Church teaches us that, up to the time of his physical death, each person, by God's mercy, has the possibility to repent. Therefore, we would deny God's mercy were we to say that people who accept the mark of Antichrist will have no further possibility of repentance. While they are still alive, this possibility will be available to them. Desiring their repentance, the Lord will send down upon them dreadful pestilences, as final, decisive measures for their spiritual restoration. (cf. Saint Andrew of Caesarea, Commentary on the Apocalypse) But, alas, Sacred Scripture clearly states that those who consciously accept the mark of Antichrist will no longer have any desire to repent. They will bite their tongues from pain, but even so they will not cease blaspheming God and they will not repent of their deeds (Rev. 16:10-11). If, among those who bow down before the beast, there should be some isolated cases of repentance, this conversion and repentance can be regarded only as a miracle of God. The conscious acceptance of the soul-destroying stamp under the assumption that one can later repent is a terrible and unforgivable sin in the eyes of God. Therefore, while there is yet time, let us prepare ourselves for the coming trials. Such preparation consists in fulfilling all the soul-saving precepts and ordinances of our Mother, the Orthodox Church. While we still have the opportunity and spiritual strength, let us tirelessly entreat the Merciful God with the words of the Lord's Prayer, as the Saviour intentionally ordained: "Our Father ... lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one."

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