

4. Signs of the Times

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4. SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT



The most important thing that one acquires through reading such basic Orthodox literature as this is a virtue which is called discernment. When we come to two phenomena which seem to be exactly alike or very similar to each other, the virtue of discernment allows us to see which of them is true and which is false: that is, which has the spirit of Christ and which might have the spirit of Antichrist. The very nature of Antichrist, who is to be the last great world ruler and the last great opponent of Christ, is to be anti-Christ—and "anti" means not merely "against," but also "in imitation of, in place of." The Antichrist, as all the Holy Fathers say in their writings about him, is to be someone who imitates Christ, that is, tries to fool people by looking as though he is Christ come back to earth. Therefore, if one has a very vague notion of Christianity or reads the Scriptures purely from one's own opinions (and one's opinions come from the air, and the air is not Christian now, but anti-Christian), then one will come to very anti-Christian conclusions. Seeing the figure of Antichrist, one will be fooled into thinking that it is Christ.

We can give a few examples of how the virtue of discernment can help us to understand some fairly complicated phenomena. One such phenomenon is the charismatic movement. There is a Greek priest, Fr. Eusebius Stephanou in Indiana, who is spreading this movement in the Orthodox Church. He has a rather large number of followers and sympathizers. He's even been to Greece and is going again soon, and there too people are sometimes quite overwhelmed by him. [Next...](#) One can see that part of the reason for his success is that he comes from an Orthodox church atmosphere in which people, being born Orthodox, go to Orthodox church, receive sacraments, and take the whole thing for granted. Since it becomes with them a matter of habit, they do not understand that the whole meaning of the Church is to have Christ in the heart, but that one can go through the whole of Orthodox Church life without having one's heart awakened. In that case, one is just like the pagans. In fact, one is more responsible than the pagans. The pagans have never heard of Christ, while the person who is Orthodox and does not know what spiritual life is simply has not yet awakened to Christ.

This is the kind of atmosphere from which Fr. Eusebius comes. Seeing that this is a spiritual deadness—and it's quite true that much of what is in the Orthodox Church is spiritually dead—he wants to make it come to life. But the trouble is that he himself belongs to the same spirit. In fact, you very seldom see that he reads the basic Orthodox books. He picks one or two that seem to agree with his point of view, but he does not have a thorough grounding in the Orthodox sources. He does not think that they are the most important things to be reading.

If you look deeply at what he and other people in the charismatic movement are saying—and our book *The Religion of the Future* goes into detail on this subject—you see that what they call a spiritual revival and a spiritual life is actually what more recent Fathers like Bishop Ignatius

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Brianchaninov carefully described as deception, that is, a kind of fever of the blood which makes it look as though one is being spiritual when actually one is not even grasping spiritual reality at all. In fact, it's as different from true Christian life, which is reflected in these very basic Orthodox books, as heaven is from earth.

Quite apart from the details of how they pray and what kind of phenomena manifest themselves at their services, you can see that the very basic idea which Fr. Eusebius and these charismatics have is a false idea. Yesterday we received an issue of Fr. Eusebius' magazine, Logos. There he talks about the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the last times preparing for the coming of Christ. All Christians are supposed to be renewed, to receive the Holy Spirit, to be speaking in tongues. This prepares for the coming of Christ, and there will be a great spiritual outpouring before Christ comes.

If you read the Scriptures carefully, without putting your prejudices into them, even without the patristic commentaries you will see that nowhere is anything said about a great spiritual outpouring at the end of the world. Christ Himself says the contrary. First he gives His teaching concerning how we should pray and have faith and not be faint. He presents the example of the woman who goes to the judge and keeps begging him to intercede in her case, and He tells us that this is how we should continue to pray and pray and pray until God hears us and gives to us. This is a very solid example about praying. Then He says, "Nevertheless" (that is, despite the fact that I've given you this teaching and this is the way to pray), "nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" In other words, despite the fact you've been given all this, there will be practically no one left who is a Christian at the end of the world. "Will He find faith on the earth?" means He will find almost no one left. There will not be flocks of people who are praying and inspired with the Holy Spirit at the end of time. All Holy Fathers who speak about this subject speak about the great terrible times at the end, and say that those who are true Christians will be hidden away and will not even be visible to the world. Those who are visible to the world will not be the true Christians.

Today there are tremendous charismatic revivals at Notre Dame University, and in Jerusalem there is every year now a charismatic conference on the Holy Spirit. Sixty, seventy thousand people come together and pray and raise up their hands, and they all speak in tongues. It looks as though the time of the Apostles has come back, but if you look at what goes on there, you see it's not the right spirit; it's a different spirit.

Therefore, when Fr. Eusebius speaks about St. Symeon the New Theologian, and about how you must know Who the Holy Spirit is and receive Him consciously, this is fine, this is good teaching—but if you have the wrong spirit, that teaching does not apply. And this is not the right spirit. There are many signs evident that it is a different spirit and not the Spirit of God.

Here is one case where, if you have discernment from basic Christian knowledge, you can look at a phenomenon which claims to be apostolic and just like the times of the early Church preparing for Christ's Second Coming, and if you look closely you can see it is not the same thing. In fact, if anything, it's just like those who want to build the Temple for Christ. They're building for Antichrist; it's totally the opposite.

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Again, you can see how discernment enables us to evaluate other phenomena which may not be identical with Orthodox phenomenon, but are new things. When you first look at them, you wonder what they are all about. This is characteristic of intellectual fashions: something gets into the air, everybody grabs it because the times are ripe for it, and then everybody begins to talk about it and it becomes the fashion of the times. Nobody quite knows how; it's just that everybody was ready for it, and all of a sudden somebody mentioned it and it began to circulate everywhere.