

Ratzinger, Tyconius, and Fatima: An Interpretive Key for the End Times

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It is no easy task to understand the present crisis of evil within the Church, which at times may seem overwhelming. Benedict XVI has indicated that the theology of Tyconius can assist the Church in understanding how to expose and ultimately defeat the evil of “false brethren” who lie hidden within her. Tyconius’ insights overlap in various ways with the message of Fatima. If we consider Benedict’s comments about Fatima in light of the Tyconian theology of the end times, we are offered a unique perspective on the nature of the Church and the antichurch during their final confrontation.

“The bishops do, under the guise of a gift of the church, what advances the will of the devil.”

– Tyconius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 4th century

“[T]he Antichrist belongs to the Church, grows in it and with it until the great discessio, which initiates the final revelatio.”

– Joseph Ratzinger, *Observations on Tyconius’ Concept of the Church*, 1956

“It is not possible for the Church to survive if it passively defers the solution of the conflict that tears apart the ‘two-part body’ to the end of time.”

– Giorgio Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End Times*, 2013

“A Great Theologian”

During his General Audience on Wednesday, April 22, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI made a remarkable reference to an obscure ancient Christian writer from North Africa, Tyconius. Even among erudite scholars and Church history buffs, the name of Tyconius is often unfamiliar. If a student ever comes across a reference to Tyconius when studying the Latin Fathers, it is usually in passing, with hardly a second glance.

By designating Tyconius that April day as “a great theologian”[1] – a Donatist who lived an ascetical life of prayer in the desert and presumably died separated from the Catholic Church[2] – was Benedict hoping that at least some souls, seeking to understand the perplexing trials of the Church during these times, would wonder why? If no one took much notice immediately, was the Holy Father confident that his allusion to Tyconius would serve as a signpost to be detected and more fully comprehended in the future?

Addressing the crowd in Saint Peter’s Square, Pope Benedict unobtrusively dropped clues about and cues toward Tyconius, seeming to mention him only incidentally while focusing his address on another relatively obscure Latin Church writer, Ambrose Autpert: “Autpert came into contact with the interpretation of the Apocalypse[3] bequeathed to us by Tyconius[4]... In his commentary he [Tyconius] 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.”[5]

Within his catechesis, Benedict XVI imparted several salient indicators of his own understanding of the true nature of the eschatological drama that is currently unfolding within the Church. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that anyone unfamiliar with Tyconius' theological outlook on the book of the Apocalypse is ultimately incapable of understanding the seemingly inexplicable thought and conduct of Benedict XVI in response to the crisis of the Church in our time. For Benedict, Tyconius' conception of what will happen to the Church in the end times provides an important "missing link" for grasping the unprecedented moment in the economy of salvation at which the Holy Father believes the Church and the world have now arrived, as well as offering insight into his exceptionally enigmatic "resignation."

As early as 1956, Joseph Ratzinger was intrigued by the 4th-century African theologian when, as a young burgeoning priest and professor, he crafted and published an essay entitled "Reflections on Tyconius' Concept of the Church in the *'Liber Regularum.'*"[6] The essay explores what Ratzinger calls the "paradox" of Tyconius: "the fact that a man consciously and willingly places himself outside of any concrete ecclesiastical communion while still wanting to remain a Christian, and believes he belongs to the true Church." [7] Thus, by the time he made his remarks at the 2009 audience, Benedict XVI had invested well over half a century of reflection on Tyconius' perception of the fate of the Church in the era of the Apocalypse (the "end times"). One cannot help but surmise that Benedict's ulterior motive in highlighting this "great theologian" was specifically to invite his listeners to enter Tyconius' eschatological worldview, through an examination of Tyconius' primary extant work, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*. [8]

"Both Black and Beautiful" – The False Brothers Within The Church

Tyconius' *Exposition*, written sometime around A.D. 390, was the first commentary of its kind on the final book of Sacred Scripture, a commentary that "shaped the Latin reception and interpretation of the Apocalypse for the next eight hundred years." [9] Tyconius postulates in the *Exposition* that "there are two cities in the world, one of God and one of the devil, one originating from the abyss, the other from heaven." [10] However, Tyconius did not regard the world as neatly or conspicuously segregated into those two obvious parts. Rather, he observes that there is an additional bifurcation: "the people of the devil also are divided into two parts, which fight against only one. Because of this, the church is called a 'third part,' and the false brothers another third, and the heathen world a third." [11] Further evidence of this two-fold composition of the people of the devil is seen when Tyconius designates the city of the devil as Babylon. "Babylon...is evil," Tyconius writes, "whether in the heathen or in false brothers." [12] For Tyconius, the city of the devil exists both outside the Church and inside the Church – not only among the pagans but also among impostor Christians.

Referring to "false brothers," Tyconius speaks in the biblical sense, following the example of both Saint Paul [13] and Saint John. [14] Tyconius thus refers to a mysterious presence of evil within salvation history that is seen throughout Sacred Scripture and culminates in the bipartite structure of the Church: she consists of two distinct bodies that co-exist in the same visible institution even though they are diametrically opposed to one another.

As David Robinson, the author of the introduction to the English translation of Tyconius' *Exposition*, notes: "For Tyconius...there are a left and a right part in the body of the Lord. The church is both black and beautiful, good and evil, enemy and beloved." [15] In his own words, Tyconius expresses this belief in a variety of ways: "in the one body there are two parts: one persevering, the other transgressing"; [16] "the good are mixed with the evil in the church up to the end of time"; [17] "the church will not spew out every evil person, but [only] some, for the purpose of showing to the world what the last persecution will be like. But with one mind she tolerates the others. Although spiritually they are outside, nevertheless they seem to be active inside"; [18] "there are two buildings in the church, one [built] upon rock, another upon sand"; [19] "this is those who seem to be in the church but are [really] outside"; [20] "the false brothers, who, having rejected Christ, confess him with their mouth but by their actions say: 'We have no king except Caesar'"; [21] and, "there is blasphemy not only in the

kings of the world, by whom those inside [the Church] are condemned; but it is even in the very ones who are inside.”[22]

Tyconius perceives this bipartite typology writ large from the beginning of the Bible to the end – in Cain and Abel; in the sons of Noah (Shem and Japheth are blessed while Ham is cursed); in Ishmael and Isaac; in Esau and Jacob; in the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The pattern is present within the Twelve Apostles, among whom there is a devil (Judas).[23] Jesus frequently alludes to it in his preaching: the weeds and the wheat;[24] the net thrown into the sea that collects fish of every kind, the good and the bad;[25] the ten virgins, five of whom were foolish and five wise;[26] the sheep and the goats.[27] In the book of the Apocalypse this theological construct is prevalent in the angelic pronouncements made to each of the seven churches, all of which point out the presence of an element within the Church that is unholy.[28]

The Church’s continual clash with the devil is the central theme of Tyconius’ commentary, yet he is particularly preoccupied with the war waged *within* the Church. Robinson again offers an insight that is striking when considered in the context of the present crisis of the Church: “[Tyconius’] primary concern is the historical and spiritual conflict between the Lord’s body (the church) and the devil’s body, which Tyconius frequently calls the enemy body. The term ‘anti-church’ is a fitting designation for the devil’s body because his body masquerades as the church. For example, Tyconius notes that both the Bride of Christ and the whore of Babylon are adorned with gold, silver, and precious stones. The devil’s body imitates the Lord’s holy body, so that one may be deceived by the similarity of splendor.”[29]

Tyconius identifies this enemy body that camouflages itself with the outward trappings of the Church using two biblical terms he deems interchangeable – the “mystery of iniquity”[30] and the “abomination of desolation.”[31] According to Tyconius, this iniquitous, abominable, adverse entity will be fully revealed only at the time of what Tyconius calls the great *discessio*, the Latin word used by Saint Jerome in his translation of 2 Thessalonians 2:3 for what Saint Paul calls ἀποστασία in Greek: “*Ne quis vos seducat ullo modo quoniam nisi venerit discessio primum et revelatus fuerit homo peccati filius perditionis*– Let no man deceive you by any means: for unless the [*discessio*] comes first, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition.” Many English translations render this word as “apostasy” or “revolt.” The Latin term clearly has the sense of a “falling away” or “separation.” It is only at the time of the “falling away” that the bipartite condition of the world – two cities, one of God and one of the devil – will be wholly laid bare and displayed in what will actually be a “tripartite” division – the true Church, the false church, and the heathen world. Tyconius explains: “Before the ‘falling away’ happens, everyone is considered the people of God. When the ‘falling away’ will have happened, then the third part of the people of God will appear;”[32] “for after the unity there is going to be another separation in the last contest.”[33]

For Tyconius, it is only when the “great *discessio*” occurs that the distinction between the true Church and the false church is finally made manifest. “Only in the *discessio* will God’s true people, the right part of the Lord’s body, be revealed.”[34] Commenting on Apocalypse 8:12, which reads, “*And the fourth angel sounded a trumpet, and a third part of the sun, and a third part of the moon, and a third part of the stars were stricken, so that a third part of them would be darkened and a third part of the day would appear as night,*”[35] Tyconius writes:

The sun, moon, and stars are the church, whose third part was stricken. ‘Third’ is a designation not a quantity. For there are two parts in the church, one of the day and the other of the night...Therefore, for this reason it was stricken, that it might become apparent which is the third part of the day and the third part of the night, which is Christ’s part and which is the devil’s part. He [the Apostle John] did not say, ‘it was stricken and it was darkened,’ but *so that it would be darkened and would appear* since it did not appear as [night at the moment it] was stricken. But it was stricken, that is, handed over to its own desires, for this [purpose]: that as their sins become more abundant and extreme, it would be revealed in due time.[36]

To sum up: Tyconius holds that there are two cities in the world, one of God and the other of the devil, and at times he speaks of both of these cities as being bipartite. Yet, Tyconius does not divide humanity into four parts. As noted above, he actually envisions humanity to be only tripartite. This is because he speaks of the “false brethren” (one of the three parts) as falling into both categories at different times. The false brethren appear to be a part of the city of God, which is the Church, but actually belong to the devil. They spiritually inhabit the city of Babylon, even though that is not outwardly recognizable. Not until the Church is “stricken”[37] as a result of the *discessio* – the great “falling away” or “apostasy” – will the “false brethren” be fully “unmasked” and “uncovered” (the original meaning of the Greek word *apokalyptein*). Only then will the true Church and the false church at long last become conspicuously distinguished.

The True Believers Will Leave The Church

Tyconius next asserts what is arguably the most arresting detail in his entire commentary. He declares that the “*discessio*” of the end times will take place in a way that completely inverts the conventional understanding of the term.

Faithful Christians usually assume that the “falling away” – the “separation,” the “departure” – will be instigated by droves of people “leaving” the Church, a massive exodus of unbelievers. The definition of “apostasy” in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* – “a total repudiation of the Christian faith” – plainly conveys such an idea.

For Tyconius, however, the opposite is true. Tyconius understands that the great “falling away” of the end times will not be caused by unfaithful people leaving the Bride of Christ, but rather by the Bride of Christ pulling away from those within her who are unfaithful. In other words, for Tyconius, it is not the infidels who will “fall away” but rather the true believers, who will withdraw from the evil within the Church. A paradoxical reversal indeed.

For Tyconius, it is the new Israel who must depart on her new Exodus. The true Church herself will effect the great apostasy as a way of salvation[38] from her enemies. In a real sense, the true Church will force the apostasy into the light, for the body of the devil, present in the false brothers inhabiting the Church, is already, and always has been, apostate. That fact has merely been concealed.

Expounding on Apocalypse 16:19, which begins, “*And the great city was divided into three parts,*” Tyconius states: “This great city is all people entirely, everyone who is under heaven, who will be divided into three parts when the church is divided, resulting in the heathen being one part; and the ‘abomination of desolation,’ another; and the church, **which will have gone out from the midst of her**, a third” [emphasis added].[39] And again, in commenting on Apocalypse 18:4 – *And I heard another voice from heaven, saying: Go out from her, my people, so that you do not share in her sins and so that you are not stricken by her plagues* – Tyconius writes: “Here he [the Apostle John] shows more fully that Babylon consists of two separate parts, external and internal, out of which also holy people, having been clearly warned by God, will leave.”[40]

As Antonio Socci writes in his analysis of Tyconius’ theology: “The Latin word *discessio* means a separation or division, meaning a great cleavage or cutting in two. It also has the sense of withdrawal.”[41] This withdrawal is patently what Tyconius infers from the revelations made by the angels of God to Saint John the Apostle – that the cleavage will be the result of a withdrawal. The Mystical Bride of Christ will extract herself from the “the mystery of iniquity,” precisely in order to expose the evil veiled within her so that she may subsequently defeat it. “In the final persecution, the ‘mystery of iniquity,’ which had been held back and hidden within the church, will come out and be revealed.”[42] That mystery of lawlessness will reach its zenith and be enfolded in the figure of the Antichrist, as Tyconius explains: “[I]t is necessary that Antichrist be revealed in the whole world, and in the same way to be overcome everywhere by the church...But now he is hidden in the church.”[43]

As a consequence of the true Church extricating herself from the anti-church, Tyconius maintains that the Body of Christ will, for all intents and purposes, activate and initiate her own passion. Tyconius writes: "Before the 'falling away' [2 Thess 2:3] happens, everyone is considered the people of God. When the 'falling away' will have happened, then the third part of the people of God will appear." [44] Robinson comments: "The saints will endure and faithfully preach God's Word, and the false brothers will be unmasked when they turn and persecute the church: 'those in league with the devil, although saying that they are Christians, will fight against the church.'" [45] Robinson thus concludes: "[t]he persecution finally and completely reveals the identity of the saints and the false brothers." [46]

Satan's Chosen Instrument: The Bishops

At this point, a natural question is: At the time of the predestined apostasy, will the faithful immediately recognize the false brethren for what they are and break off affiliation with them, or will genuine believers be persuaded to remain in association with the impostors, listening to them and following their lead? How will the false brethren deceive people into trusting their guidance? Tyconius is unequivocally emphatic about this point: these false brethren are often found among the church's leaders, the bishops.

In denouncing the hypocrisy of the bishops, Tyconius gives an account of the "second beast" introduced in Apocalypse 13:11: *And I saw another beast coming up out of the land. And he had two horns similar to those of a lamb, and he spoke as a snake.* Tyconius decries:

A lamb carries on after a snake secretly inserts its venom [into it]. For if he spoke openly as a snake, he would not be similar to a lamb. Now he fashions himself into a lamb, through which [disguise] he attacks a secure lamb. He speaks for God, through which [disguise] he turns away from the way of truth those seeking God. Because of this the Lord said: 'Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.' [47]

Tyconius concludes this passage with one of his most incisive observations: "The bishops do, under the guise of a gift of the church, what advances the will of the devil." [48] The bishops offer to the beast the veneer of a lamb, while he uses them as mouthpieces for his agenda.

In another passage, Saint John's Apocalypse continues: *"And I saw three unclean spirits [go forth] from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet.* [49] Tyconius remarks: "For the dragon, that is, the devil; and the beast, the body of the devil; and the false prophets, that is, **the bishops of the body of the devil**, are one spirit." [emphasis added] [50] Furthermore, Tyconius declares, "**the throne of the beast is his church**," [emphasis added] [51] on account of the duplicitous bishops that will be under his sway. Those treacherous bishops will give shape and form to the devil's body – the false church – even after the true Church has detached herself from it.

The Passion of the Church

Once the apostasy has been enacted, however, the Bride of Christ (the true Church) will then be battling not only the false brothers but the heathen world as well, which will have joined forces with the false brothers in an openly united demonic front: "to the whole body of the devil it was permitted by God." [52] Yet, there is no question in Tyconius' mind of the final outcome for the Church: "the last persecution will purify her up to the seventh trumpet," which will mark "the coming of the Lord." [53] That will be "the church of the future time when, with the wicked already separated from the midst, only the good will reign with Christ." [54] Thus, Tyconius is certain that "the church of the last time, whether in its bishops or in its people, is in no way able to perish." [55] Although she will be persecuted, like her Bridegroom, and even appear defeated, she cannot be permanently destroyed. She shares in the Bridegroom's divine life. Furthermore, she will prevail over the

Antichrist and ultimately rout the false church. Nevertheless, Tyconius had no illusions about the severity of that ultimate conflict. In what might be the most lucid and pristine section in his entire *Exposition*, when drawing the parallel between Christ and His Church, Tyconius emphasizes their interconnectedness:

That which the head suffered once, now he suffers through his members, since he has clothed himself with his church: and the church is slain daily for Christ that it may live with him forever. No one should think that the apostles alone had died for Christ and that now martyrdom has ceased and that the persecutors are not in the church. For it is necessary that the Son of Man always goes “to Jerusalem...to suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and to be killed, and to rise again after three days.”[56]

Thus, in that culminating persecution, when the false brethren and the pagan world relentlessly attack the Church, the co-mingling of suffering between Jesus and His Mystical Body and Bride will reach its apex: “In her the Lord completes what he began. Therefore, in her he receives what he gave, and he is crowned in her whom he crowns. For there is nothing that he does or has without his body.”[57] Jesus gave His life for His Bride, the Church. In the end times, she will give herself for Him in a way she never has before. Just as Jesus glorified His Father through His self-offering, and so also His Father glorified Him with the glory that His Son had with Him before the world began,[58] so also, at that time, the Church’s ultimate self-offering will be her crowning moment of giving herself completely for Christ, and He in turn will crown her. He and His Bride will then be perfectly one in their mutual gift of self.

Tyconius, Fatima, and the Great Apostasy

Seen in the light of Tyconian theology, Benedict XVI’s various comments about the significance of the message of Fatima take on a new significance. It becomes apparent that Benedict XVI’s understands the message of Fatima within the context of Tyconius’ assertion that the greatest evil for the Church in the end times is the evil hidden within her.

During Benedict XVI’s pilgrimage to Fatima in May 2010, a reporter asked the Holy Father:

Your Holiness, what meaning do the Fatima apparitions have for us today? In June 2000, when you presented the text of the third secret in the Vatican Press Office, a number of us and our former colleagues were present. You were asked if the message could be extended, beyond the attack on John Paul II, to other sufferings on the part of the Popes. Is it possible, to your mind, to include in that vision the sufferings of the Church today?[59]

Considering that the Holy See had essentially closed the door on the Third Secret of Fatima, Benedict’s reply was nothing short of stupefying. It can now also be perceived as “Tyconian”:

... [B]eyond this great vision of the suffering of the Pope, which we can in the first place refer to Pope John Paul II, an indication is given of realities involving the future of the Church, which are gradually taking shape and becoming evident. So it is true that, in addition to the moment indicated in the vision, there is mention of, there is seen, the need for a passion of the Church, which naturally is reflected in the person of the Pope, yet the Pope stands for the Church and thus it is sufferings of the Church that are announced. The Lord told us that the Church would constantly be suffering, in different ways, until the end of the world...As for the new things which we can find in this message today, there is also the fact that attacks on the Pope and the Church come not only from without, but the sufferings of the Church come precisely from within the Church, from the sin existing within the Church. This too is something that we have always known, but today we are seeing it in a really terrifying way: that the greatest persecution of the Church comes not from her enemies without, but arises from sin within the Church...”[60]

In stating that the vision of the suffering Pope “can” refer to John Paul II “in the first place,” Benedict implies that the vision refers to another Pope, or at least that it is not limited to John Paul II alone. Further, if what was shown to the children still involves “the future of the Church,” then the unfolding of the Third Secret is definitely *not* over and done with. Rather, the events that the Third Secret points to are “gradually taking shape and becoming evident.”

Benedict’s most theologically-charged statement, however, was his comment about the vision designating a *passion of the Church*. According to Benedict’s assessment, the revelation to the three young children of Fatima was primarily about that passion – the coming sufferings of the Church, which are still to unfold and will be “reflected in the person of the Pope.” And, from where will the attacks that bring about this passion arise? He attested: “*Precisely from within the Church.*”

In addition to these remarks from 2010, Cardinal Ratzinger’s comments in a 1984 interview with *Jesus* magazine are also full of import:

Interviewer: “Cardinal Ratzinger, have you read what is called the Third Secret of Fatima: i.e., the one that Sister Lucia had sent to Pope John XXIII and which the latter did not wish to make known and consigned to the Vatican archives?”

Ratzinger: “Yes, I have read it.”

Interviewer: “Why has it not been revealed?”

Ratzinger: “*Because, according to the judgment of the Popes, it adds nothing (literally: ‘nothing different’) to what a Christian must know concerning what derives from Revelation: i.e., a radical call for conversion; the absolute importance of history; the dangers threatening the faith and the life of the Christian, and therefore of the world. And then the importance of the ‘novissimi’ (the last events at the end of time). If it is not made public — at least for the time being — it is in order to prevent religious prophecy from being mistaken for a quest for the sensational (literally: ‘for sensationalism’). But the things contained in this ‘Third Secret’ correspond to what has been announced in Scripture and has been said again and again in many other Marian apparitions, first of all that of Fatima in what is already known of what its message contains.*”[61]

Analyzing Ratzinger’s comments, one author posits:

[W]hen Cardinal Ratzinger spoke of the dangers to the Faith and the life of the Christian, he referred to other Marian apparitions, and he referred to Sacred Scripture – that what is in the Third Secret corresponds to Scripture. It [also] corresponds to what has been mentioned again and again in many other Marian apparitions.

In referring to Scripture he specifies the eschatological texts of Scripture when he used that phrase in Italian, *novissimi* [“the last things”]. Some have rather disingenuously tried to argue that when we speak of the “last things” we are talking about death, judgement, heaven and hell – the four last things. But that is not possibly what Cardinal Ratzinger was talking about; that is not possibly what Our Lady was talking about. If we want to learn about the four last things, we need only to consult the catechism; it is very clearly set forth there. Our Lady did not come down from heaven to impart a simple catechism lesson.

When the Cardinal spoke of the last things, he was referring to what the prophet Daniel said would take place in the end. He was referring to the end times – the last things; or as we would say in Greek, *eschata*. The eschatological things, the eschatological texts of Scripture. This is the Third Secret...”[62]

Evaluating other messages of the Blessed Virgin Mary from Church-approved apparition sites, one is inclined to agree with that author. In addition, two Cardinals who had personally read the Third Secret offer further credence to that viewpoint. First, Cardinal Oddi, a personal friend of Pope John XXIII, who had discussed the secret with him, said in testimony to an Italian journalist in 1990: "It [the Third Secret] has nothing to do with Gorbachev. The Blessed Virgin was alerting us against apostasy in the Church." [63] Second, Cardinal Ciappi, a personal papal theologian to Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II, in a communication to a certain Professor Baumgartner in Salzburg, divulged: "In the Third Secret it is foretold, among other things, that the great apostasy in the Church will begin at the top." [64]

Alberto Cosmedo Amaral, Bishop of Fatima from 1972-1993, gave a nod in the same direction – that of apostasy – when he attested at a question-and-answer session at the Technical University of Vienna in 1984:

The Secret of Fatima speaks neither of atomic bombs, nor nuclear warheads, nor Pershing missiles, nor SS-20's. Its content concerns only our faith. To identify the Secret with catastrophic announcements or with a nuclear holocaust is to deform the meaning of the message. *The loss of faith of a continent is worse than the annihilation of a nation*; and it is true that faith is continually diminishing in Europe. [65]

As a final endorsement of this perspective, Fr. Gabriel Amorth, the former Chief Exorcist of Rome, who personally knew Padre Pio for twenty-six years, gave a nearly identical verification, which he attributed to the great Capuchin saint and extraordinary mystic. Here is a segment of his exchange with Spanish author, José María Zavala, during a 2011 interview:

"Forgive me for insisting on the Third Secret of Fatima: Did Padre Pio relate it, then, to the loss of faith within the Church?"

Fr. Gabriele furrows his brow and sticks out his chin. He seems very affected.

"Indeed," he states, "One day Padre Pio said to me very sorrowfully: 'You know, Gabriele? It is Satan who has been introduced into the bosom of the Church and within a very short time will come to rule a false Church.'"

"Oh my God! Some kind of Antichrist! When did he prophesy this to you?" I [Zavala] ask.

"It must have been about 1960, since I was already a priest then."

"Was that why John XXIII had such a panic about publishing the Third Secret of Fatima, so that the people wouldn't think that he was the anti-pope or whatever it was...?"

A slight but knowing smile curls the lips of Father Amorth.

"Did Padre Pio say anything else to you about future catastrophes: earthquakes, floods, wars, epidemics, hunger...? Did he allude to the same plagues prophesied in the Holy Scriptures?"

"Nothing of the sort mattered to him, however terrifying they proved to be, except for the great apostasy within the Church. This was the issue that really tormented him and for which he prayed and offered a great part of his suffering, crucified out of love."

"The Third Secret of Fatima?"

"Exactly." [66]

Chronologically and theologically, what does the “great apostasy” have to do with “*i novissimi*” to which Ratzinger referred? It is their linchpin. Saint Paul affirms in his Second Epistle to the Thessalonians that the great apostasy is the triggering event for the commencement of “the last things,” that which unlocks the door for the advent of the “son of perdition”/ “the lawless one”/ “the Antichrist.”[67] Once set in motion, there is no turning back. The world and all of humanity will have entered a collision course with destiny.

The Resignation and “A Bishop Dressed In White”

So then, consider at least some of the elements that Pope Benedict XVI had before him. As cardinal, he had already attested that the Third Secret of Fatima pertains to “the last things,” and multiple reliable sources have confirmed that it relates specifically to the great apostasy. If Benedict accepts Tyconius’ rendering of how that apostasy commences and is operating from that vantage point, might that not shed light on his bizarre and controversial “resignation?” Could his decision to “step aside” in 2013 be the result of having deciphered the Third Secret from an entirely singular outlook, influenced by his study of Tyconius? Does he view the theology of Tyconius as inextricably intertwined with Mary’s message at Fatima? And, if so, has he realized that, as Pope, he has had to initiate the “withdrawal” of the true Church from the false so as to inaugurate the great apostasy and begin the exposure of the false brethren who have infiltrated the Church to the highest of levels?

With those questions in mind, let us look anew at the portion of the Third Secret (transcribed by Sister Lucia herself) which pertains to the Pope:

“And we saw in an immense light that is God: ‘something similar to how people appear in a mirror when they pass in front of it’ a Bishop dressed in White – ‘we had the impression that it was the Holy Father.’ Other Bishops, Priests, men and women Religious going up a steep mountain, at the top of which there was a big Cross of rough-hewn trunks as of a cork-tree with the bark; before reaching there the Holy Father passed through a big city half in ruins and half trembling with halting step, afflicted with pain and sorrow, he prayed for the souls of the corpses he met on his way.”[68]

Reflecting on Sister Lucia’s vision, Antonio Socci proposes that the “bishop dressed in white” and the “Holy Father” may actually be two distinct persons. He provocatively asks: “Does . . . the ‘secret’ that has at its center two figures – the ‘bishop dressed in white’ and an old pope – speak to us about the present? Who are these two figures?”[69] Further, Socci notes a truly stunning development: “On May 12, 2017, at Fatima, it was Pope Bergoglio himself who said that he is ‘the bishop dressed in white.’[70]

The idea that the vision refers to two separate people is not implausible. Sister Lucia herself provides a two-fold clarification of the identity of the “bishop dressed in white.” She even put her descriptive observations in quotation marks to demarcate them. The original Portuguese document uses two sets of quotation marks (also used in the English translation above) immediately before speaking of the “bishop dressed in white” and immediately after.

First, Sister Lucia says that she and her two young companions beheld the appearance of the “bishop” as **“something similar to how people appear in a mirror when they pass in front of it.”** She then said, **“We had the impression that it was the Holy Father.”** But later in the document she unequivocally speaks of **“the Holy Father.”**

In support of the argument that the vision denotes two different people, it can be argued that the children of Fatima were unsure of who the bishop dressed in white was. Little children from a backwater town in Portugal would never have looked upon someone dressed in white and thought that he was a bishop. Catholic children in a small European village in the early twentieth century knew of only one church leader who dressed in white: the pope. Furthermore, if they thought that the person dressed in white whom they saw was the pope,

wouldn't Lucia have simply referred to him as such from the very beginning? It is inexplicable that she would describe him as "a bishop dressed in white," unless, in fact, the children somehow were given to know, or intuited, that the individual that they saw was only a bishop who was wearing white. Later in the same testimony, when Lucia does indicate that she saw **"the Holy Father,"** she has no hesitation about whom she is beholding and the veracity of her assertion. If it was the same individual, wouldn't Sister Lucia have continued to refer to him as the **"bishop in white?"** Sister Lucia was always extremely attentive to detail and careful to relay exactly what the Blessed Virgin revealed to her. It would have been quite simple for her to keep referring to the **"bishop in white"** if it was in fact one and the same person. But she did not do this. Her words make clear that there are two distinct persons: the **"bishop dressed in white"** and **"the Holy Father."**

Did Benedict XVI have the foresight to comprehend that his apparent successor would be the bishop dressed in white, long before Bergoglio was even **"elected"?** Did Benedict understand, well in advance, what Socci would one day speculate was the meaning of the Third Secret? Was he the first Pope to grasp that the Third Secret denotes a true Pope and a false one – an apparent pope who is actually only a bishop dressed in white – which was what Sister Lucia was trying to say (and of course also the Blessed Virgin) from the start?

Benedict knew the framework of Tyconius' theology of the end times well. He knew that "after the unity there is going to be another separation in the last contest."^[71] He also knew that "holy people, having been clearly warned by God, will leave" the false church, causing the "great *discessio*." Within such an understanding of "eschatological ecclesiology" – what must happen to the Church in the end times – the two figures described by Sister Lucia would have taken on a unique significance in the acutely theologically aware mind of Joseph Ratzinger.

Benedict as Abraham

It seems quite possible that at a certain point Pope Benedict XVI ascertained the overlap and intersection of the message of Fatima and the theology of Tyconius and, in doing so, realized his own staggering and monumental mission – that he was being called, like Abraham, to set forth in faith, **"not knowing where he was to go."**^[72] To take the Church, as Abraham took Isaac, and prepare to offer her as a holocaust.^[73] So that **"from one man, himself as good as dead"**^[74] numerous descendants would one day come forth because of Benedict's faith. A step that could only be taken because of a direct and personal call from God. A step that would make no sense if considered in terms of human calculation or worldly prudence. But a step that would initiate a new Exodus for the new Israel at the hour of her **"final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his Death and Resurrection."**^[75]

No faithful Catholic would dare to take such a step of separation, of withdrawal from what appears to be the true Church, unless he was following the Successor of Peter. There could be no definitive separation, no **"great discessio"** of the true Church from the false unless Peter himself were to step out in faith, led by the Holy Spirit.^[76]

Likewise, if the false church were to be **"perfected"** in its iniquity, it would require its own false ruler, as foretold by Padre Pio,^[77] at the moment of the great *discessio*. A false pope. One who appears to be a pope but in fact is only a bishop, drawn from the group of bishops who, in Tyconius' words, **"do, under the guise of a gift of the church, what advances the will of the devil."**^[78] A counterfeit of the true Church, but only an illusion, something that is seen "as in a mirror" – permitted to have the power to deceive the entire world, and almost the entire Church, to expose and reveal the "mystery of iniquity" concealed within the Church that is now to be definitively destroyed by a deliverance that God Himself will provide.^[79]

Venerable Fulton Sheen described the coming anti-church with uncanny accuracy as early as 1948:

[The Antichrist] will have one great secret which he will tell to no one: he will not believe in God. Because his religion will be brotherhood without the fatherhood of God, he will deceive even the elect. He will set up a counterchurch which will be the ape of the Church, because he, the Devil, is the ape of God. It will have all the notes and characteristics of the Church, but in reverse and emptied of its divine content. It will be a mystical body of the Antichrist that will in all externals resemble the mystical body of Christ. . . .[80]

Sheen's prophetic statements resonate with the address given by Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II, in his address at the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1976:

We are now standing in the face of the greatest historical confrontation humanity has ever experienced. I do not think that the wide circle of the American Society, or the whole wide circle of the Christian Community realize this fully. We are now facing the final confrontation between *the Church and the anti-church*, between the gospel and the anti-gospel, between Christ and the Antichrist. The confrontation lies within the plans of Divine Providence. It is, therefore, in God's Plan, and it must be a trial which the Church must take up, and face courageously.[81]

Did Benedict XVI glean from the Third Secret, in accord with the teaching of Tyconius, that in God's providential designs the climax of the confrontation between the true Church and the anti-church could only take place when the valid Successor of Peter permitted the arrival of the "bishop dressed in white"? That what was shown to the children of Fatima was exactly what Sister Lucia describes – a "mirror image" – one who appears to be the Holy Father but in fact is only a double? Was Sister Lucia additionally trying to communicate and highlight this "semblance of a pope" when she said: "[W]e had the impression that it was the Holy Father"? Did she intend to place the emphasis in that sentence on the word "impression"? – "[W]e had the impression that it was the Holy Father." – Was this because, when the "bishop dressed in white" would finally appear, the whole world would be under that same "impression"? While, in point of fact, the bishop dressed in white would only resemble the pope, the way an image seen in a mirror resembles reality – an imitation . . . an empty reproduction . . . a usurper. If so, did this awareness lead Benedict XVI to set out in faith, like Abraham, "not knowing where he was going,"[82] handing practical power over the visible structure of the church, to a "bishop dressed in white," so as to initiate the "great *discessio*"?