

SICK, SICK, SICK:
THE PRESENT STATUS OF THE
VICARIUS FILII DEI INTERPRETATION

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I have never written much about the title “*Vicarius Filii Dei*” (henceforth, *VFD*) because I have long considered it a dead issue. For a century, Adventist evangelists claimed that the (Roman) numerical total of this Latin papal title equaled 666. They hailed it as a fulfillment of Rev. 13:18. Catholics, on the other hand, criticized the identification on at least two grounds:

1. It arbitrarily utilizes only one, rarely used title applied to the pope (of doubtful official status).
2. It arbitrarily calculates the 'number' of that *Latin* title according to Roman numerals, to provide a fulfillment for the prophecies of a *Greek* text.¹

These factors made the identification appear stretched and indefensible. The *VFD* view effectively argued from convenience: seeking what *worked* to satisfy the 666 prophecy, no matter how tenuous the connections. Of course, the Adventist view was always fraught with other weaknesses. For instance, Adventists provide two different referents for the “number of the beast” and the “mark of the beast” (i.e., *VFD* and Sunday worship, respectively), despite the fact Revelation explicitly equates the two: “the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name” (13:17).

Today, Catholics should feel vindicated in their opposition to the *VFD* identification. In the past decade, an official organ of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has cast terminal doubt upon it (in a piece by the president of the General Conference's Biblical Research Institute, no less).² That critique is grounded on several observations long noted by Catholic apologists:

1. Adventists sometimes suggest that the identification works in Greek and Hebrew as well, but only by using different titles (e.g., “*Lateinos*” in Greek).

2. Rodriguez, Angel M., *Adult Sabbath School Lesson* (7 June 2006), 86.

Vicarius Filii Dei: (Vicar of the Son of God). Since the Reformation, this papal title has been used to calculate the number 666. But there are several questions that should make us cautious. First, it is not clear that this title is an official one. Second, there is no clear indication in Revelation 13 that the number is based on the numerical value of the letters of a name. The phrase “it is the number of a man” (vs 18 NIV) could be translated “it is the number of [humanity]”; that is, of humans separated from God. Third, those who insist in counting the numerical value of letters confront the problem of deciding which language will be used. Because the text does not identify any language, the selection of a particular one will be somewhat arbitrary. At the present time, the symbolism of intensified rebellion, six used three times, and total independence from God seem to be the best option. Time will reveal the full meaning of the symbol.³

Not only is the identification no longer “the best option,” the piece closes with the affirmation that “for now” Adventists do not know “the precise meaning of 666.”⁴ Thus, the “Adventist church recently rejected the numeric identification of 666 with the pope’s title *Vicarius Filii Dei* and adopted instead the symbolic interpretation of the number of the beast.”⁵

This well-publicized repudiation follows several decades of Adventist theologians recognizing the flaws of the *VFD* view, and exploring alternative options. The DARCOM series’ *Symposium on Revelation—Book 2*, published by the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference a decade earlier, explicitly suggested the *VFD* view is not the most promising interpretation of Rev. 13:18.⁶ Another popular Adventist writer (Bacchiocchi) expounded the weaknesses and troubled history of this identification at length.⁷ From the perspective of modern Adventist scholarship, then, the identification of *VFD* with the number of the beast (i.e., 666) is a mere

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. Bacchiocchi, Samuele, “The Setting of Revelation and the Mark of the Beast” (Endtime Issues Newsletter, No. 192), 20.

6. Johnsson, 31. Strand, 202-203.

7. Bacchiocchi, Samuele, “The Setting of Revelation and the Mark of the Beast” (Endtime Issues Newsletter, No. 192), “The Saga of the Adventist Papal Tiara: Part 2” (Endtime Issues Newsletter, No. 146), and “The Saga of *Vicarius Filii Dei* on the Papal Tiara” (Endtime Issues Newsletter, No. 196).

relic, unoriginal to Adventism, recycled from 17th Century Protestant interpreters, and worthy of abandonment.

Catholic Response

Unfortunately, it will take decades before Adventist evangelists and laymen finally retire the *VFD* view. Some have obstinately resisted the conclusions of modern Adventist scholars; others simply do not keep abreast of such developments, or feel comfortable repeating the traditional view.⁸ As long as these Adventists continue to defend it, Catholics will expose its flimsy basis, and can now count mainstream Adventist scholars among *their allies*. Truly, Adventist evangelists ought to abandon the former view uniformly, lest their credibility suffer when Catholics publicly expose the division within Adventism on the question. They cannot afford the confusion this would produce in listening inquirers.

Of course, when these individuals finally abandon the interpretation, it will be sad to see so glaring an Achilles heel finally disappear. The indefensibility and arbitrary nature of the *VFD* identification actually served Catholic purposes, exposing the often-ridiculous extremes of the Adventist system of prophetic interpretation, which remains profoundly flawed.

On the other hand, its absence will force Catholic-Adventist conversations to consider more substantial questions surrounding the mark/number/ name of the beast—questions Adventism is ill equipped to engage.⁹ Its demise may also cast doubt on other equally arbitrary aspects of Adventist prophetic interpretation (i.e., the start and end dates of the “era of papal supremacy” [538-1798]), though Ellen White's endorsement of many of these may preclude so welcome a development. (Bacchiocchi's criticisms of 538,1798 were met with stronger opposition.)

I continue to encounter online forums and blogs still debating the status of the papal title, its use on the papal tiara, and its connection to the

8. Positively, Mark Finley's “Discoveries ‘08” prophecy seminar (NET2008) omitted any reference to the *Vicarius Filii Dei* identification, instead presenting an alternative view (where 666 represents anti-‘trinitarian’ imperfection; episode 21 [25 Nov. 2008]). Hopefully, this will development will set a trend; in my recent experience, many evangelists (and the evangelistic literature they distribute) continue to espouse the *VFD* interpretation. The literature distributed by Amazing Facts, for instance, preserves it.

9. My critique of the Adventist view may be reviewed at: Mendez, Hugo, “Missing the Mark”: Is Sunday Observance the Mark of the Beast?” (Accessed Online: 30 December 2008) <http://www.diesdomini.com/Papers/Q_Prophecy_sealmark.pdf>.

cryptic number 666. I respectfully submit such conversations are ten years too late, from the perspective of Adventist theology. Perhaps at this stage, our attention might better address to the following concerns:

1. Is the past application of this title (i.e., *VFD*) to the pope problematic, or ultimately inconsequential? (E.g., is it a mere appendage to a more *general* discussion of papal claims?)
2. Should we continue to discuss *VFD* at all, and if so, in what contexts (other than those named above)?
3. Does the Adventist abandonment of *VFD* as a fulfillment of the 'number of the beast' undermine or call into question other traditional Adventist views?
4. What other traditional Adventist views can/should be safely abandoned?

A conversation grounded in these questions could open new and fruitful directions in Catholic-Adventist dialogue. It would certainly prove more fruitful than those conversations that centered on the defense of the *VFD* identification.