So why, when and how did Futurism creep into early church doctrine? When this interpretation of prophecy began should be of particular interest to all schools of prophetic interpretation. Dr. Guinness throws open the door of enlightenment to that dubious honor with this revealing bit of history:

We shall show that the futurist school of interpretation, on the contrary, is chiefly represented by teachers belonging to the Church of Rome; that the popes, cardinals, bishops, and priests of that apostate Church are all futurists, and that the futurist interpretation is one of the chief pillars of Romanism.

The former, or futurist system of interpreting the prophecies is now held, strange to say, by many Protestants, but it was first invented by the Jesuit Ribera, at the end of the sixteenth century, to relieve the Papacy from the terrible stigma cast upon it by the Protestant interpretation. This interpretation was so evidently the true and intended one, that the adherents of the Papacy felt its edge must, at any cost, be turned or blunted. If the Papacy were the predicted antichrist, as Protestants asserted, there was an end of the question, and separation from it became an imperative duty.

First, note the fact that Rome's reply to the Reformation in the 16th century included an answer to the prophetic teachings of the Reformers. Through the Jesuits Ribera and Bellarmine, Rome put forth her futurist interpretation of prophecy. Ribera was a Jesuit priest of Salamanca. In 1585 he published a commentary on the Apocalypse, denying the application of the prophecies concerning antichrist to the existing Church of Rome. He was followed by Cardinal Bellarmine, a nephew of Pope Marcellus II, who was born in Tuscany in 1542, and died in Rome in 1621. Bellarmine was not only a man of great learning, but the most powerful controversialist in defence [sic] of Popery that the Roman Church ever produced." Clement VIII used these remarkable words on his nomination: "We choose him, because the Church of God does not possess his equal in learning."

Bellarmine, like Ribera, advocated the futurist interpretation of prophecy. He taught that antichrist would be one particular man, that he would be a Jew, that he would be preceded by the reappearance of the literal Enoch and Elias, that he would rebuild the Jewish temple at Jerusalem, compel circumcision, abolish the Christian sacraments, abolish every other form of religion, would manifestly and avowedly deny Christ, would assume to be Christ, and would be received by the Jews as their Messiah, would pretend to be God, would make a literal image speak, would feign himself dead and rise again, and would conquer the whole world – Christian, Mohammedan, and heathen; and all this in the space of three and a half years. He insisted that the prophecies of Daniel, Paul, and John, with reference to the antichrist, had no application what- ever to the Papal power.
There were only two alternatives. If the antichrist were not a present power, he must be either a past or a future one. Some writers asserted that the predictions pointed back to Nero. [This became the Preterist view] This did not take into account the obvious fact that the anti-Christian power predicted was to succeed the fall of the Caesars, and develop among the Gothic nations. The other alternative became therefore the popular one with Papists. Antichrist was future, so Ribera and Bossuet and others taught. An individual man was intended, not a dynasty; the duration of his power would not be for twelve and a half centuries, but only three and a half years; he would be a Jew, and sit in a Jewish temple. Speculation about the future took the place of study of the past and present, and careful comparison of the facts of history with the predictions of prophecy. This related, so it was asserted, not to the main course of the history of the Church, but only to the few closing years of her history.

In another of his books, The Approaching End of the Age, Dr. Guinness sheds further light on the origins of Futurism:

The third or FUTURIST view, is that which teaches that the prophetic visions of Revelation, from chapters iv to xix, prefigure events still wholly future and not to take place, till just at the close of this dispensation.

In its present form however it may be said to have originated at the end of the sixteenth century, with the Jesuit Ribera, who, moved like Alcazar, to relieve the Papacy from the terrible stigma cast upon it by the Protestant interpretation, tried to do so, by referring those prophecies to the distant future, instead of like Alcazar to the distant past. For a considerable period this view was confined to Romanists, and was refuted by several masterly Protestant works. But of late years, since the commencement of this century, it has sprung up afresh, and sprung up strange to say among Protestants. It was revived by such writers as the two Maitlands, Burgh, Tyso, Dr. Dodd, the leaders of the "Brethren" generally, and by some Puseyite expositors also.

Another accomplished author and church historian who has written extensively on prophecy is Leroy Edwin Froom. In his book The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers, Vol. II, he brings to light some startling bits of history:

As to Futurism, for some three centuries this view was virtually confined to Romanists, and was
refuted by several masterly Protestant works. But early in the nineteenth century it sprang forth afresh, this time among Protestants – Samuel R. Maitland, William Burgh, J. H. Todd, and more recently it has been adopted by most Fundamentalists. In 1826 Maitland revived Ribera’s Futurist interpretation in England. The Plymouth Brethren, organized in 1830 by John Nelson Darby, at Dublin and Plymouth, also laid hold on Maitland’s interpretation. And when the High-Church Oxford Movement (1833-1845) gained ascendancy in Britain, it rejected the Protestant Historical School of interpretation and generally adopted Futurism, though some among them swung to Preterism. Bursting into full flame in 1833, it seized upon Maitland’s interpretation as an argument in favor of reunion with Rome. German rationalism, on the other hand, increasingly flouted prophecy and prediction. Thus the Jesuit schemes of counter-interpretation were more successful than their authors had ever dared anticipate.

Tanner expresses the tragedy of modern Protestantism thus playing into the hands of Romanism:

It is a matter for deep regret that those who hold and advocate the Futurist system at the present day, Protestants as they are for the most part, are thus really playing into the hands of Rome, and helping to screen the Papacy from detection as the Antichrist. It has been well said that "Futurism tends to obliterate the brand put by the Holy Spirit upon Popery." More especially is this to be deplored at a time when the Papal Antichrist seems to be making an expiring effort to regain his former hold on men's minds.

Thus Guinness and others have opened the pages of history to reveal the origins of Futurist thinking. However, Romanism did not consider the Futurist interpretation of prophecy sufficient to lay all questions and objections to rest. There had to be another school of interpretation to answer those objects while simultaneously removing the Papacy from the Reformers’ glare.