

YOUR ADVERSARY THE DEVIL

THE subject of the devil and his power to do evil to man is seldom discussed in the pulpit with all the exactness of sound theology. A missionary will descant on the mighty intelligence of Satan, and his relentless attack on the human race. He may even draw pictures of the dreadful state of a soul that has surrendered to the devil, and become completely possessed by him. He will warn his hearers that the devil is a powerful adversary, and that their strength is small and puny compared with Satan's. In all this there is a good purpose, and the missionary's words are often a very useful goad for the sluggish type of character that requires more vivid and more fiery (often in a literal sense) motives of action than the somewhat cold idea of duty to God. But there is a want of exactness and balance if no mention is made of the precise limits of Satan's power over man, and there is the danger of causing unnecessary fear. One could wish that more attention were devoted to a careful explanation of the method of Satan's attack, and of the limits of its efficacy.

A very important point to make, first of all, is that the devil can never act *directly* on the human intellect or the will. In other words, the devil has no means of getting inside a man's soul and taking possession of man's free-will. St. Thomas gives the following reason: to be within another is to be within his terms (terminos, limits), which is an easy thing with respect to body, in which are terms (limits) of quantity; with respect to spirit, however, which has only terms (limits) of essence, naught enters therein except he who gives being (esse), namely God the Creator: because for the limitation of each (*ob limitationem uniuscujusque*) our spirit does not depend intrinsically

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on another either in being or in operation, but on God alone, who has supreme power over all. It is therefore impossible for the devil to enter into possession of the human soul, and since the intellect and will are the two essential faculties of the soul, it is also impossible for the devil to act on them directly and immediately. The intellect and will are spiritual faculties, immediately created by God and *sui juris*, so that they depend on God alone, who alone is able to act on them. So, whatever diabolic possession may mean, it certainly does not mean that the devil gets such a grip on a man's soul that he is able completely to prevent the soul from turning to God. Stories about men selling themselves to the devil, and afterwards finding to their horror that they can never repent of their bargain, and that they are completely cut off from God—such stories are devoid of theological foundation. The most that can be said for them is that they contain a certain symbolic truth: they may be looked upon as the dramatic expression of the possibility of final impenitence. But literally and historically these stories are simply not true. So long as a man lives on earth his soul is his own and has its own internal liberty, and the internal acts of the soul can always merit God's favour. The devil can never directly shut off a soul from God's help. From the point of view of theology stories like that of Dr. Faustus need to be carefully re-written. One would not recommend, of course, a learned divine to present an emended edition of the opera or of Marlowe's play: the story as drama is superb, magnificent; but one would suggest to pious souls a somewhat different attitude of mind to the drama, and to, let us say, a meditation on the power of Satan.

But the question will be asked: If, then, as you say, it is impossible for the devil to act directly on the human intellect and will, how is it possible for him to

attack the human soul at all, and how do you explain such a thing as diabolic possession? Now it is quite certain that there is such a thing as diabolic possession, as is evident from the Gospels and the history of the Church. But the important thing to understand is that diabolic possession has only an *indirect* effect on the soul: it is not immediately concerned with the soul at all. This will be made clear in a discussion of the exact definition of diabolic possession, and the discussion will serve a double purpose by bringing out clearly also the answer to the other question, namely, how does Satan attack the soul, or, more simply, how does the devil tempt us?

Diabolic possession is not something spiritual, a seizing of the soul. It is something bodily, an affliction of the corporeal faculties. As a well-known theological text-book defines it: *Possessio est actio daemonis, qui corpus hominis intrat, in illo habitat, ibique operatur, sensibus et membris utendo, insolitosque actus producendo*: which, translated literally means: 'Possession is the action of the demon who enters a man's body, dwells therein, and there does his work, making use of the senses and the limbs, and producing unaccustomed acts.' The important word is the word 'body.' Let me repeat once more, possession is not an affliction of the soul: it is an affliction of the body, and all Satan's attacks are made through the body or the bodily faculties. For the reasons outlined above one spirit cannot be under the complete control of another, but matter may be under the control of spirit, and Almighty God sometimes permits the material part of man to be under the control of Satan. The effects of possession therefore must be looked for in the body, and in the corporeal faculties.

Among these corporeal faculties is one which is called the imagination, and it plays a very important part in the drama of diabolic attack and invasion. It

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is as well to say here that by imagination I do not mean such a thing as the divine imagination of poets or anything of that kind. I am using the word 'imagination' in a technical sense: by imagination I mean that faculty in man which helps him to produce thoughts by providing him with vivid, internal pictures of the subjects he is thinking on. It is important to notice that the pictures here referred to are not the mental things which we call ideas. These pictures are not mental, though they are inside a man's head, if I may put it that way: they belong to the bodily side of man, because they have shape and colour and so forth, and the faculty which produces them is bodily: this faculty is known to Catholic philosophers as the imagination.

In one who is possessed by the devil the imagination may certainly be largely under the control of Satan: in this state vivid interior pictures come to a man and lead to thoughts of evil: the thoughts do not come from Satan, but the images in the imagination do, and the imagination is so continually flooded with evil pictures that the other faculty, the spiritual one, which we call the intellect, is continually disposed to evil thoughts. Yet even in this state the soul has its own internal freedom, and can begin to move towards God. I pre-suppose, of course, the necessary help of God; but that is pre-supposed in every human act.

From what has been said it may be gathered that the imagination is Satan's chief field of operations. This applies not only to cases of possession, but to all the ordinary cases of temptation as well, and it is now possible for us to give an answer to the other question, namely, how does Satan tempt us? Satan tempts us by putting pictures and suggestions in the imagination and by leaving those pictures to work their effect on the intellect. The activity of the imagination causes thoughts to rise up in the intellect, and the resulting thoughts are full of evil, and strongly solicit the will

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to agree to evil deeds. How important it is that the young and adolescent should have presented to them sights and scenes of beauty and calm and wholesomeness, and that they should learn to control that picture-making faculty within them. For, while it is true that Satan can rouse up pictures in the imagination, yet he cannot put in anything that the imagination has not experienced in some way before. The less experience the child-imagination has had of evil or unwholesomeness in sights and scenes, the less is Satan able to influence it afterwards. It is evident that mortification of the senses and the imagination is one of the strongest bulwarks against the onset of Satan.

It may be well here to point out that writers on diabolic possession distinguish between 'possession' and 'obsession.' Obsession is defined as the action of the devil who, as it were, lays siege to a man's body *from without*, afflicting it with diverse ills, and at the same time causing grievous temptations. On the other hand possession, as we have seen, is the action of the devil who *enters* a man's body, and *dwells* therein. In a case of obsession the devil makes his attack from without, while in a case of possession the devil actually indwells in the body. But as regards the effect on the imagination at the time of attack, possession, obsession, and grievous temptation may be classed alike, and in all these cases the soul, the spiritual part of man, is never under the direct sway of Satan.

It is interesting to find in the Gospels an example of a possessed person beginning within herself the process of a re-union with God, and it helps to bring out the fact that a possessed person is not completely under the control of Satan, that a possessed person still retains the use of free-will. Of Mary Magdalen we are told that Our Lord cast out seven devils from her. Yet, in that beautiful description of her repent-

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ance in the seventh chapter of St. Luke, we find her going of her own accord to the house of Simon the Pharisee, where Our Lord was at meat with Simon, and we notice that the emphasis is all on the interior dispositions of her heart. 'Many sins are forgiven her because she hath loved much' and 'Thy faith hath made thee whole, go in peace.' Our Lord's words of absolution, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee,' grant her forgiveness and peace of heart, but the process of repentance begins within herself through the divine attraction, of Our Lord.

So it comes to this, that a person who is possessed or obsessed or fiercely attacked by the devil (and I am pre-supposing this to be through his own fault) can know for certain that his pathway to God is the same as the sinner's pathway, and that a prayer, a cry of the heart, an act of sorrow, sets his feet firmly on the way which leads to the gateway of Penance and the Banquet of the Sacred Body of His Lord and Master. No matter how much such a soul may feel itself shut in by evil thoughts, its groaning cry to God is always certainly heard. There are indeed cases where the Church uses the power of exorcism to drive the devil out of the body; but these cases are very rare, and they are well marked by definite signs, the chief of which may be found set out in the 'Rituale Romanum.' In these extremely rare cases, though the soul of the possessed person is still internally free and therefore able to respond by internal acts to God's promptings of grace, yet the devil has such power over the body and the imagination that he acts like one huge overwhelming distraction preventing by this activity any calm, connected thought—in fact, any thought at all—making the tongue utter hideous blasphemies, and disposing the body for exterior acts of evil. But these cases are extremely rare, and reference is made to them only for the sake of completeness.

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Satan's power, therefore, over man is quite definitely limited. He can never enter into the citadel of a man's own soul : God alone has that right of entry. And so long as a man is on this earth, God can and does act on his soul, and give grace. The only real obstacle to God is man himself, man's perverse will. In that, certainly, man is cleverer than the evil spirits : he can raise between his soul and God a barrier that even Satan himself cannot raise.

The sum of the matter is this, that in the warfare against Satan a man should remember that his position can never be stormed so long as his heart is set towards good and wills to do the right thing, and that even if through his fault the outer fortress has been surrendered, it is absolutely impossible for the citadel of his free-will to be entirely given over to the foe, and that even when the whole place seems to be full of the enemy troops, yet it is still possible for him to collect his scattered forces and by a simple movement of the heart, a simple act of contrition, begin to drive out the invader.

SACERDOS QUIDAM.