

Homily January 31, 2021
4th Sunday Ordinary Time

Deliver us from the Evil One

The Center for Applied Research is a national, non-profit, Georgetown University affiliated research center that conducts social scientific studies about the Catholic Church. In 2017 they asked the General Public this question. “What is your understanding with the term “Devil”. It is a symbolic term or a real thing?

- 69% when hearing the term thought it merely symbolic.
- 31% a real, person.

Among American Catholics the same question was asked

- 83% considered the Devil to be a symbol.
- 17% a living being.

St Augustine so aware of the reality of evil in the world wrote in his Confessions:

I was looking for where the evil came from, and I could find no explanation.¹

What about you? Do you think the devil a symbolic way to describe evil or is the Devil a personal being? Do you have an explanation for evil?

As Augustine came to recognize, evil can only be explained when understood from the biblical world view. When we look to the most famous prayer, Jesus concludes the Lord’s Prayer with the words: “Deliver us from evil the evil one.” The whole of the biblical tradition takes seriously that the devil is a personal spiritual being – not to mention contemporary popes.

During a May 24, 1987, visit to the Sanctuary of Saint Michael the Archangel, Saint Pope John Paul II said:

“The battle against the devil, which is the principal task of Saint Michael the archangel, is still being fought today, because the devil is still alive and active in the world. The evil that surrounds us today, the disorders that plague our society, man’s inconsistency and brokenness, are not only the results of original sin, but also the result of Satan’s pervasive and dark action.²

Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation “The Call to Holiness in today’s World” ends this papal document with a chapter entitled: “Spiritual Combat, Vigilance and Discernment.” He writes:

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/audiences/1972/documents/hf_p-vi_aud_19721115.html

² Amorth, Gabriele . An Exorcist Tells His Story (p. 31). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

It is precisely the conviction that this malign power is present in our midst. Hence, we should not think of the devil as a myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea. This mistake would lead us to let down our guard, to grow careless and end up more vulnerable.

The devil does not need to possess us. He poisons us with the venom of hatred, desolation, envy, and vice. When we let down our guard, he takes advantage of it to destroy our lives, our families, and our communities. “Like a roaring lion, he prowls around, looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8).³

What informs the popes to write so clearly about the devil? For starters, passages like the one we heard today from Mark chapter 1. This is the first public act in Jesus’ ministry in Mark’s Gospel and you will see that it is all about the authority of Jesus Christ. In our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, we are told of a prophet who will be the New Moses:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people⁴

This prophet is Jesus of whom we are told in Mark:

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes⁵

What they heard in Jesus was someone whose words spoke to the people in a way that they definitively understood the meaning of the Scriptures. Notice that his teaching has the effect of exposing evil. Mark does not explain whether the man with an unclean spirit a regular synagogue attendee was or whether he came specifically to disrupt Jesus’ sermon. But in the presence of Jesus, the grip of evil on the man comes to light and he cries out in fear and rage, what have you to do with us? The spirit is challenging Jesus’ encroachment on the demons’ formerly uncontested territory, evidently aware that his coming portends their downfall. The spirit claims hidden knowledge of Jesus’ identity, a frequent demonic tactic (3:11; 5:7) that may be intended to catch Jesus off guard or gain some control over him. But the attempt is futile.

“Holy One” is a term usually reserved for God (1 Sam 2:2; Hosea 11:9) but is occasionally used for those who are consecrated in his service as priests or prophets (Num 16:5–7; 2 Kings 4:9; Ps 106:16). Holy One of God is an accurate title for Jesus (see John 6:69), but not one that he wants

³ Francis, Pope. *Gaudete et Exsultate: On the Call to Holiness in Today's World* (p. 80). Our Sunday Visitor. Kindle Edition.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Dt 18:18). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Mk 1:22). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

publicized at this point in his mission. He will reveal his identity on his own terms and in his own time, to ensure that it will be rightly understood⁶

The story of Jesus' first exorcism portrays the forces of evil that reflects clearly the language used by the popes to talk about the Devil and demonic forces. For Mark, as for the whole New Testament, evil is not an impersonal force but is concentrated in invisible, malevolent beings who are bent on destroying human beings and hindering God's plan of salvation. These evil spirits are responsible for various mental and even physical maladies (7:25; 9:17–27; see Matt 12:22; Luke 13:11). Therefore, the Church has always taught, however, that demons are real spiritual beings, fallen angels who were created by God but became evil by their own free choice (Catechism, 391–95). Anyone tempted to dismiss accounts of demons as fables does not have to look far to see evidence of their influence today. Such phenomena as “racial cleansing,” group suicides, and the sexual abuse of children show a more than merely human malice at work, seeking to destroy the image of God in men and women. But as frightening and real as is the power of demons, the authority of Christ is infinitely superior. Through his cross and resurrection, Christ definitively conquered the powers of hell. For the present time, however, their malicious actions are permitted by God, who can work good out of every evil (Rom 8:28)..

I would like to end my homily by sharing with you why this topic is so timely for me and by extension for us as a Parish. On January 1st Bishop McGrattan appointed me the chair of the Spiritual Discernment Committee. This assignment is the way I can help serve the larger Diocese while continuing to serve St. Peter's as your Pastor. In my preparation for this work, I am currently taking a year-long course to help me better understand the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the forces of darkness. This will then help me in my work of spiritual discernment, not only at the level of the Diocese but as your pastor. It will also provide opportunities for me to support my brother priests in this area of ministry.

I ask especially for your prayers so that the priestly ministry that we exercise will have the authority of Jesus to both name the devil and demons as a personal destructive spirit while ministering in the name of Jesus. We pray that the influence of demonic spirits be arrested by the ministry of the Church so in turn we can take to heart these words of Pope Francis:

Our path towards holiness is a constant battle. Those who do not realize this will be prey to failure or mediocrity. For this spiritual combat, we can count on the powerful weapons that the Lord has given us: faith-filled prayer, meditation on the word of God, the celebration of Mass, Eucharistic adoration, sacramental Reconciliation, works of charity, community life, missionary outreach. If we become careless, the false promises of evil will easily seduce us. As the sainted Cura Brochero (Argentine priest) observed, “What good is it when Lucifer promises you freedom and showers you with all his benefits, if those benefits are false, deceptive and poisonous?”⁷

⁶ Healy, M. (2008). [The Gospel of Mark](#) (p. 45). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

⁷ Francis, Pope. Gaudete et Exsultate: On the Call to Holiness in Today's World (p. 81). Our Sunday Visitor. Kindle Edition.

I pray that we will realize that when we know that the explanation of evil can only be understood when we recognize the power of these malevolent fallen angels that we will call on the one with even greater power, so we can pray:

“Deliver us from the evil one”