On Demons

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There is a widespread tendency to deny the existence of the devil and to refuse to regard him as a real being. Some people—especially among those considered intellectuals—believe that the devil is a human invention and that evil exists essentially within man alone, not also outside him. Yet those who hold this view do not adequately explain the origin of man's inclination toward evil. Nor do they offer a clear answer to the perennial question: How can finite man possess such seemingly limitless energy for immensely destructive evil?

It would be understandable if those who denied the devil were found only among unbelievers. Recently, however, it appears that some preachers and teachers have also begun either to deny the devil or to exclude him and his influence from the lives of believers. They are driven to this either by personal conviction—forgetting that they belong to an integrated system of faith—or by a desire to remove the fear of the devil from the consciousness of believers. Secular thought has begun to invade the Church, and the matter under discussion is but one sign of this invasion.

Opposed to this tendency is the inclination to attribute the cause of every evil to the devil, thereby absolving human beings of personal responsibility and neglecting the effort to understand the evils that occur and investigate their various causes.

What does the Christian faith say about this matter and about these two opposing tendencies? According to the Christian faith, demons are living, bodiless beings. They were originally angels who rejected God, fell away from His presence, and became enemies of Him and His followers.

Divine revelation does not disclose to us how or why the demons fell. Holy Scripture merely alludes to a great catastrophe that occurred at the dawn of creation—after the creation of the angels and before the creation of the visible world—of which we know only the results and consequences. Some of the angels set themselves in opposition to God. They fell and became enemies of everything good and holy:

> "War arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great

> dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (Rev. 12:7–9).

Likewise, the Revelation of John says:

> "... a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the fountains of water" (8:10).

Christian tradition therefore calls the leader of this rebellion "Lucifer," a word meaning "bearer of light." This indicates that he was an angel who fell because, by his own free will, he changed from his natural state to an unnatural one. He set himself against God and fell from goodness into evil.

To deny the existence, activity, and influence of the devil is incompatible with the Gospel. The teaching of the Lord Jesus is perfectly clear on this matter. He called him "the ruler of this world" (John 14:30), and He confronted him personally during His temptation following His baptism and forty-day fast (Matthew 4 and Luke 4). He also spoke explicitly about him in the parable of the wheat and the tares (weeds):

> "The field is the world, and the good seed means the children of the Kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels" (Matt. 13:38–39).

We shall also cite two passages from the Apostle Paul:

> "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:11–12).

And:

> "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14).

In its Hebrew and Greek origins, the word “Satan” conveys several meanings, all of which express some aspect of evil: the adversary, because he is the enemy of man; the opponent, because he resists God and His will; the divider, because he stands behind every division and separation; and the deceiver, because he schemes against man in countless ways in order to lead him into sin. Christ called him in the Gospel “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

Many people ask: Why do we not see the devil or encounter him personally? The Christian answer is very simple: he has no need to reveal himself to human beings. It is enough for him merely to suggest something to them or whisper a thought, and they readily respond. In other words, the spiritual weakness of human beings makes it unnecessary for the devil to confront them personally. From the experiences of the great spiritual fathers, however, we know that they encountered him personally and that he attacked and fought against them. This was because he could not overcome them through thoughts and suggestions.

This does not mean that an ordinary person does not experience the devil’s existence and activity around and within him. Any one of us, by attentively observing himself in the spiritual life, can perceive an unseen power pushing him—wholly or partially—toward evil. Decide, for example, to give a certain sum of money to a needy person who deserves it. Then notice how many thoughts come to you, from the moment you make the decision until you carry it out, urging you to reduce the amount!

The practical question remains: What attitude should we adopt toward the devil?

The Christian spiritual tradition, particularly the Orthodox tradition, advises us neither to exaggerate his role nor to underestimate him and his activity. Nor should we use him as an excuse to avoid investigating the personal, individual, and social causes that lead to evil and misery, or the natural causes that produce disasters, epidemics, and diseases.

Exaggerating the devil’s role and absolving ourselves of personal responsibility for the evil surrounding us both contribute to the growth of the tendency to deny his existence. They also place man in a state of terror before him and consequently render him incapable of resisting him. At the same time, underestimating the devil

and his influence places us, without our realizing it, beneath his power and influence. He then directs us while we remain unaware.

Our spiritual tradition also counsels us not to use the devil as an excuse to absolve ourselves of personal responsibility for the evil around us. We believe that, after the fall of Adam and Eve, humanity became vulnerable to the evil that gained mastery over it. Yet we also believe that, through Christ risen from the dead, we are no longer under the evil one's direct dominion—unless we deny Christ and our baptism and willingly surrender ourselves to the devil.

The Christian, therefore, must confront the evil within himself and strive earnestly to be delivered from it by replacing it with good. Our spiritual tradition teaches that merely uprooting a vice from the soul is insufficient; it calls us to replace that vice with its opposite virtue.

Thus, man's struggle to purify and elevate his soul rests upon his care to acquire the virtues. There is a direct relationship here: the more you are filled with the love of God and with virtue, the less evil remains within you.

Our world will remain the arena of conflict between the victorious power of God and the powers of the demons until the last day. We encounter this conflict first of all within ourselves, on the personal level. The Lord revealed this to us in the parable of the wheat and the tares, which will be separated on the last day (Matt. 13:40).

The great spiritual fathers attribute every evil in the world to themselves, believing that, had they been purified as they ought, the condition of the world would have been better. As one contemporary theologian said:

> "The problem is not that not all human beings are Christians, but that not all Christians are saints."

This is how believers confront the evil one.