



The Devil

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WORD^{on}FIRE



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Transcript taken from a talk given by
Bishop Robert Barron.

Cover image: Luca Signorelli, *Sermon and
Deeds of the Antichrist*, detail, c. 1501.

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In the sixth chapter of Mark's gospel, we find the account of Jesus sending his disciples out on mission. They are going to preach, they are going to heal, and so on. But the first thing he tells them is that they have authority over unclean spirits. When they return from mission, the first thing they tell him is, "We cast out many demons in your name" (Matt. 7:22). Now, when I was coming of age, even in the seminary, that kind of language was seen as a primitive superstition, or we tried to put a sort of literary spin on it. It was a symbol for evil or it was a personification of evil in the personal or institutional sense. That approach does not do justice to the Bible. The Bible knows all about personal sin. It also knows about institutional disorder and dysfunction very clearly, but it knows about a third level, a third dimension of evil that undergirds the other two and is more pervasive and dangerous. This is the level of truly spiritual evil.

I am talking about fallen angels. Now, Catholics get up every single week, and we confess our belief in God who made the visible world and the invisible world. It means a realm of spirits at a higher pitch of existence. What is a devil but a fallen or morally compromised angel? There are good and bad human beings. There are good and bad angels. Think of a wicked person you know who is also very smart, very talented, and

well connected. That is a truly dangerous figure, when you combine wickedness with lots of other powers. So a devil—an angel who has gone bad—is a dangerous figure indeed.

Now, do devils influence the world sometimes in very direct and frightening ways? Yes. Talk to anyone involved in exorcism. I have talked to a few over the years and some extraordinary stories ensue. That is not the typical way that the dark realm intervenes, however. Usually it does so in a much more indirect way, by suggestion or temptation. Something I featured in the *Catholicism* series is what I think is the most frightening religious painting in the world, done by the great early Renaissance master Luca Signorelli and located at the Orvieto Cathedral. Among the frescoes there, the most striking one is a depiction of the Antichrist. The Antichrist figure in the fresco is listening as the devil whispers in his ear. It is a classic symbol of this temptation, but what is really interesting is the devil puts his hand in the vesture of the Antichrist, in such a way that it looks for all the world like the Antichrist's own arm. It is a very clever way of suggesting how the dark powers influence us indirectly, in such a way that it looks like our own activity. In many ways it is, but yet it is the dark powers having invaded.

Now, what are the signs of the demonic? What are the ways the demonic appears? Look at the names the

Bible gives the devils, called in the Greek δῆβολος (diabolos), *diablo* in Spanish, and *le diable* in French; διαβάλλειν (diaballein) means “to cast apart,” “to throw apart,” “to scatter.” The great sign of the demonic is *scattering*. God is a great *gathering* force. Whenever things come together, when a community forms, that is a sign of the Holy Spirit. The scattering power is a sign of the darker powers. When families get scattered, when business organizations, communities, and cultures get divided, that comes from the demonic.

The other great name in the Bible is Σατανᾶς (Satanas), the Greek word based on the Hebrew word that means “the accuser.” Try this experiment: examine your conscience and consider how many times in the course of the day you accuse someone of something. I bet you would be surprised. We do it a lot; it is one of our favorite indoor pastimes. Point the finger, blame, gossip, destroy someone’s character. The Holy Spirit lifts up and confirms and affirms someone in his or her personhood, but the sign of the demonic is accusation. The Bible also calls the devil the “father of lies.” God is truth, truthfulness about ourselves, about our relationships, about our family, and everything else. Truthfulness is always the path of light, the path that leads to smooth functioning.

The sign of the demonic is deceitfulness, untruth. Think of the way an untruth about you has perhaps

wounded you in a very deep way. Someone said something about you that was not true, but yet it wounded you in such a way that that wound is still festering after many years. Think of the times you have wounded somebody with an untruth. The wrecking of someone's reputation or character by means of a lie are signs of the dark powers.

The most frightening name is in the first letter of John. The author from the beginning refers to the devil as the "murderer." God is life; whatever enhances life is of the Holy Spirit. That is why John Paul II talked about the culture of death. The sign of the dark power is always an increase in death. It is a negation of life. Look at the twentieth century, which is the bloodiest on record. The number of people killed for ideological purposes in warfare in the twentieth century was the worst ever. Can you explain that entirely through psychological or political categories? It seems almost comically inadequate to say that Hitler, Stalin, Mao, etc. are simply explicable politically or psychologically. There is something about the pervasiveness of violence and the destruction of life in the twentieth century that has all the marks of the "murderer" from the beginning.

Now so far, that is the bad news. The good news, which is central to Christianity, is that Christ has conquered these powers. He has conquered individual sin and collective institutional sin, but the Bible also

clearly witnesses to the fact that Jesus has conquered these powers.

In the second chapter of Colossians, Paul uses an image borrowed from his own time: when a Roman general won a victory, he would bring the leaders of a captive nation back and parade them in chains through the street to humiliate them. Paul says Christ through his cross has done just that with the dark powers: he has chained them up and made a public display of them. We read that language now and think, what is he talking about? But a Roman citizen, a citizen of that world, would see that they are humiliating these conquered people. That is what Christ did through the power of the cross, which means that we do not have to be beholden to these powers. They have been defeated and we can now claim victory over them.

What are the weapons that we have, to stay with that military analogy? The Mass, the Eucharist, confession, the sacraments, the saints. In other words, you might construe the whole stuff of the Church as the weapons that we can use in the battle against the dark powers. As Catholics in droves are now staying away from all those weapons, one sad thing is that they should not be too surprised that the dark powers can begin to have an influence over them. Switch the analogy to a medical one, especially with confession in mind. Suppose you have a bad cut on your hand, a deep cut,

which you never attend to. Before long, bacteria and germs will get in and the hand will become infected. If you ignore that, in time your whole body will become infected. Now think of sin. I don't mean trivial sin here, but that repeated, untreated habitual sin that we can all fall into as a kind of an open wound in our spirit. What can happen is that the "germs and bacteria" in the spiritual order, the dark powers, can use that as a way of getting in, a way of influencing you. What does the Church give us as the means to treat these wounds? Confession, the reception of absolution, which treats the wound. We have the weapons and the medical means to deal with these powers. They have been defeated by Christ, but we have to claim that victory. We have to claim that healing. And I think that is right near the heart of the Christian thing to this day: as Jesus sent them out 2000 years ago to do battle, he still sends a Church out for the same purpose in our time.

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