It was in 1965 in Fr. Noone’s English class at LeMoyne College that I first read Stephen Vincent Benet’s short story *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. Mostly an item of Americana, it is worth reading. For it also prompts some serious thinking about matters of faith for Catholic believers. Daniel Webster was an orator and effective lawyer who served in the US Senate from Massachusetts. He was author of strong compromise legislation prior to the Civil War as he fought to preserve the Union.

Benet’s description of Webster is classic! “There were thousands who trusted him right next to God…. They said, when he stood up to speak, stars and stripes came right out in the sky, and once he spoke against a river and made it sink into the ground. They said, when he walked the woods with his fishing rod, Killall, the trout would jump out of the streams right into his pockets…. The chickens he raised were all white meat down through the drumsticks, the cows were tended like children, and the big ram he called Goliath had horns with a curl like a morning-glory vine and could butt through an iron door.” A certain exaggeration here? Perhaps… But you get the point.

Effective an orator as he was, Webster met his match one day when he was called to defend a New Hampshire farmer, Jabez Stone. For Stone had literally sold his soul to the devil, in return for 7 years of great prosperity and even election success. When the trial opened the prosecutor arrived ready to claim his prize. He was well dressed, tall and dark, polite and well mannered, and very firm. He even sat down to have a drink from the jug on the table with his legal opponent.

In this court Daniel Webster seemed like a defeated man, for the contract was valid and payment due. But he kept on thinking and kept on arguing. He got his opponent (who claimed the name of Scratch) to admit: “When the first wrong was done to the first Indian, I was there. When the first slaver put out for the Congo, I stood on her deck.” Immersed in history old Scratch was. For this opponent was *the Devil!*

How the story ends I’m not going to tell you. It’s worth the short read! One noteworthy thing is how the devil appears: tall, dark, polite and with good manners, knowledgeable, even ready to have a drink with those whose souls he sought. And his admissions: there when the first native peoples were mistreated,
there when African slaves were first brought to America. That list could go on and on.

There is a devil you know! Jesus tells us that today through the Gospel, declaring that his power is of God and opposed to the way of Satan. The existence of the devil is a truth of faith. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that this one is a fallen angel who rebelled against God and made an irrevocable choice to work against his Will. (#391 ff.) God allows Satan to work in the world, but he has forever been conquered by Jesus the Lord. Praise him always!

Pope Francis has affirmed the existence of this evil one. “The path to holiness does not involve wrestling with some abstract boogeyman, but involves a “constant struggle against the devil, the prince of evil, “ he has taught in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*. He goes on: “We should not think of the devil as a myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea. This mistake would leave us to let down our guard, to grow careless and end up more vulnerable.” Those are strong words. I hope you’re hearing them!

Stephen Vincent Benet envisioned Satan coming as a well-dressed, well-spoken American, masterfully adept in his pursuit of souls. Yet Satan himself admitted his role in the oppression of native people and African natives brought to these shores in slavery.

Have you encountered the devil? We all have, I fear. In the conduct of Hitler, the genocide in Rwanda some years ago, the terrorist attacks on our country in 2001 and since, and, yes, in the attacks on human life institutionalized in our country by the embrace of the practice of abortion from which few recoil in horror as the believer should.

Think! Where have you seen the devil? What did he look like? What did he accomplish? It is only through faith in Jesus and constant prayer in the unity of the Church, nourished by the Eucharist and the sacraments, that we find our greatest hope, and hope for Satan’s defeat. Are you faith-filled enough to withstand the attacks of old Scratch when he appears again at your door? Not on your own. None of us is, alone. Not even one!

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