

7th Wednesday of Easter 2021

Acts 20:28-38

At Miletus, Paul spoke to the presbyters of the Church of Ephesus: "Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the Church of God that he acquired with his own Blood.

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock.

And from your own group, men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them.

So be vigilant and remember that for three years, night and day, I unceasingly admonished each of you with tears.

And now I commend you to God and to that gracious word of his that can build you up and give you the inheritance among all who are consecrated.

I have never wanted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You know well that these very hands have served my needs and my companions.

In every way I have shown you that by hard work of that sort we must help the weak, and keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

When he had finished speaking he knelt down and prayed with them all. They were all weeping loudly as they threw their arms around Paul and kissed him, for they were deeply distressed that he had said that they would never see his face again. Then they escorted him to the ship.

John 17:11b-19

Lifting up his eyes to heaven, Jesus prayed, saying: "Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are one.

When I was with them I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them, and none of them was lost except the son of destruction, in order that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

But now I am coming to you. I speak this in the world so that they may share my joy completely.

I gave them your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the Evil One.

They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.

Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth.

As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth."



This Photo by Unknown
Author is licensed under
CC BY-NC



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC-

or

✠

I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the Evil One.

Who is the Evil One? Who is the Evil One to you?

Only 17% of all Catholics polled indicated that they viewed Satan as a living presence in the world. This runs counter to Catholic teachings which describe Satan as a real being, specifically a fallen angel who rebelled against God.ⁱ Rather, Catholics are more likely to view Satan as a symbol of evil rather than a “real” living being.ⁱⁱ

Earlier this year the recently elected superior of the Jesuits, Fr. Arturo Marcelino Sosa, told an interviewer for the Spanish newspaper, *El Mundo*, that “We have formed symbolic figures such as the devil to express evil.”ⁱⁱⁱ

How can evil exist in a universe created by a loving God?

Some point to the original sin, the disobedient choice by Adam & Eve and the loss of Paradise. It is the theme of the travails of Job. While the book goes into much concerning how bad things happen to good people, it never definitively gives the straight up answer. We even have special vocabulary for this conundrum: theodicy.

Theodicy, (from Greek theos, “god”; dikē, “justice”), explanation of why a perfectly good, almighty, and all-knowing God permits evil. The term literally means “justifying God.”^{iv}

As a public safety officer for 26 years, I was employed by the good people of Kalamazoo to deal daily with the manifestation of evil. I have my own impressions, as much so as the other more than 800,000 police officers or as much so as the 3.3 million crime victims in the US.^{v vi}

In my calls, I found the frailties of human character all too familiar.

They are pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth,^[2] vii ... and that's me on a good day. In addition to these seven deadly sins, the sins from which most other sins flow, may I add fear.

While sins are free-will choices and while fear is normally considered an emotion, there are times when I reject the peace and consolation offered by Jesus and make the self-serving and often self-destructive choice of fear... and others suffer for it.

Yes, there is plenty of human frailty to explain evil.

Yet, I have met evil face-to-face. There is something chilling in the air. It makes a Catholic cop touch the saint medal they wear and start reciting, "St. Michael the archangel, defend us in battle..." I've seen it in the sly sneer of an offender which seems to say, "Yeah, and so?" Most of the people I've fought were struggling to get away, and yet there were a few here and there who just wanted to put me out.

So, when the Gospels tell us of Jesus' encounters with evil spirits, I know what that looks like and feels like. There is nothing I read of Jesus' quotes that seem like a metaphor about evil to me.

That does not mean that the whole Bible is to be understood in a literal interpretation. The Church teaches about the range of Biblical literature to include history, the law, prophecy, wisdom, the poetic, the apocalyptic, gospels and epistles. viii The Church guides us in our interpretation of Scripture by applying the lens of the literal sense and spiritual sense including the allegorical, moral and anagogical. A medieval couplet summarizes the significance of the four senses.

*The Letter speaks of the deeds; Allegory to faith;
The Moral how to act; Anagogy our destiny.* ix

I offer this to say that one can understand how different Biblical scholars and theologians can bring different and opposing perspectives. One person sees the miraculous where another person sees the symbolic.

I have a little rubric I use to help me discern the miraculous and metaphysical.

The Bible is a lot of things, but primarily it is God revealing himself. Often, a miraculous event creates a great reaction from the witnesses. They experience something memorable for the ages. They try to describe the event through a limited and insufficient language. For an example: is there any description that can capture one's experience of the Grand Canyon?

Often, to make those fantastic accounts relevant to modern life today, an explanation is offered which sometimes rules out the miraculous, but focuses on its

moral implications and issues of justice. Catholic Social Teaching calls us to always examine moral implications and issues of justice. It is about loving God and neighbor.

My little rubric is this: if words are insufficient to express the profundity of the experience, does the interpretation make it more so or less so? Does it explain the unexplainable away? How would that better lead us to behold the One being revealed? That often leaves me without an explanation and another person with a rational one. While I really truly wish to be rational, I think I chose the better part.

So, with the Devil, the Evil One from whom Jesus prays to the Father to keep his people safe: is the Devil real, a source for the emanation of evil? Is Satan the fallen angel who leads the other fallen spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls?

The Tradition of the Church teaches so. Pope Francis preaches so.^x And as I read the Gospels, it looks to me like Jesus thinks so.

So, what if I'm right? So, what if I'm wrong? What difference does it make? When I'm waiting at the Pearly Gate, will I get extra points or be deducted for my keen or errant theology?

My reflection is my own. I know some to whom I look up to as living saints who hold a contrary opinion.

I know I am a sinner. I am sorry for my sins. When I go to communion, I say that with the grace of God, I will sin no more... and yet that becomes my life-long struggle with sin and redemption.

Knowing that Satan is a real spiritual being reminds me that I am insufficient in the task of leading a holy life.

If I thought the evil in my life was self-generating, I may be led to believe that all I need to do is to up my game in self-improvement. Maybe I could tap into God's anima to provide that extra boost in devotion, discipline and perseverance. Maybe I can do this.

My confession is that I too often follow this spiritual path. This path has not served me well.

I confess that this mere human is no match for the power of Satan. I cry for assistance and protection. I cannot save myself from the prince of evil. My salvation is completely in the hands of our omnipotent Father. *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. (Ps 23:4)*

With great contention theologians will continue to wrangle with theodicy, spiritual beings, and the nature of good and evil. Despite our wrangling, it will not change the reality of the physical and spiritual realms of God's creation. We'll all know for sure sooner or later. That's so at least for me; I am closer to my exit date (?) than my birthdate (5/20/52). Maybe I'll find a way to let you know once I get to the other side. Soon and very soon we will all know.

Until then, may my fear of the Evil One, who ceaselessly prods my worst dispositions, keep me close to my Jesus. I pray that in his loving embrace that I may find the answer to all of my heart's longings. Completely in my Jesus' embrace—not a bad place to be, donchaknow.



*Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle.
Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil;
May God rebuke him, we humbly pray;
And do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God,
thrust into hell Satan and all evil spirits
who wander through the world for the ruin of souls. Amen*

ⁱ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 391-395

ⁱⁱ <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/09/08/what-the-devil/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/06/02/italian-exorcist-to-jesuit-leader-no-the-devil-isnt-just-a-symbol/>

^{iv} <https://www.britannica.com/topic/theodicy-theology>

^v <https://nleomf.org/facts-figures/law-enforcement-facts>

^{vi} <https://www.ojp.gov/topics/victims-crime>

^{vii} Aquinas, Thomas (20 August 2013). *Summa Theologica (All Complete & Unabridged 3 Parts + Supplement & Appendix + interactive links and annotations)*. e-artnow. ISBN 9788074842924.

^{viii} <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/570bc781b6aa60017e66cca4/t/5c6c4f40eb393136fc7d0e70/1550602049454/Quick+Guide+to+Biblical+Genres.pdf>

^{ix} CCC 118

^x https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130314_omelia-cardinali.html

"Anyone who does not pray to the Lord prays to the devil." When we do not profess Jesus Christ, we profess the worldliness of the devil, a demonic worldliness."