

Discerning Evil

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Next Saturday evening at Mass the First Scrutiny of those preparing to become Catholics at Easter will take place. Fr Steve will stretch out his hands over them and say ‘**Lord Jesus...by your power, free these elect from the cunning of Satan, as they draw near to the fountain of living water**’ and ‘**free them from the slavery of sin, and from Satan’s crushing yoke...**’ (there is an alternative prayer, but the sentiments are the same). Satan is there, in the rite.

We saw last week how belief in a personal devil is pretty basic to mainstream Christianity, and this week we will look at a small number of examples of his activity in the world and in the Church. We don’t just pray that the elect may be freed from his cunning; the catechumens and candidates are meant to be examples for the rest of us in Lent, as I said in my homily (at the 6pm and 8am Masses) last weekend. This means that we all have to try and engage in the process of discernment and recognition characterised by the struggles with the Evil One of the early desert fathers.

This process is a struggle in two ways. It needs to be preceded, (perhaps every year in Lent) by serious prayer, confession, a certain amount of fasting and an effort to attune ourselves to the teachings of the Church: in particular, this evening, we will be looking at that branch of our moral theology known as Catholic Social teaching. I say this because sometimes when we talk about the sort of things I will address this evening we are accused, even by our own people, of interfering in things which are none of our business, particularly politics. We must never allow this claim - we are talking about faith, theology and spirituality.

It is struggle in the obvious sense that we are engaged in a struggle with the power of evil, which is very strong and insidious, and for this we need the strength we can only get from God’s grace, mediated through the sacraments and teachings of the Church. But if we’re honest it’s also a struggle because the process of discernment, of trying to recognise evil, might be painful for us, challenging many of our inbuilt assumptions. This should happen because the spiritual life is always a journey, a process involving change, and often the need to recognise that we have been wrong about something in the past. So changing our views when we see that something is evil (which we might not have seen before) is a process of conversion, of turning again to God.

As I am really going to talk about three things, or sets of things, some may feel that manifestations of evil have been left out. In general I haven’t included here things we all know are evil (such as many attacks on the sanctity of life); my purpose is to challenge by prompting us to think of things afresh.

Xenophobia

Last summer, a couple of weeks before the EU Referendum vote, I had lunch in Hammersmith, near the offices of the Catholic paper *The Tablet*, with the paper’s publisher. He took me to the Polish cultural centre there, which houses at least one very good Polish restaurant. Shortly after the vote the centre was vandalised, along with Polish businesses elsewhere in the country. In this parish and elsewhere, in response to incidents of this kind and others people from Eastern Europe (and in some cases, elsewhere in the world, outside the EU) opened up to clergy about their fears and anxieties for the future. I was reminded of this when I read these words in the new book by the former politician Roy Hattersley, *The Catholics*, which only came out last week:

‘The Catholic Church in Britain ought to regard May 1st 2004 as a red-letter day, even though it passed without the martyrdom of a single saint or the manifestation of a solitary miracle. It was the date of Poland’s accession to the European Union and of the arrival of the first Polish immigrants....’



During the referendum campaign I wrote and talked extensively about the reasons why the campaign to take the UK out of Europe was and is at odds with Roman Catholic teaching. Indeed some of the responses to what I wrote were so strong that they could almost be described as ‘hate mail.’ As I gave a talk in the parish in May I won’t rehearse again the three main reasons for this - the Church’s position, based on solidarity, about international reconciliation, cooperation and integration, the Leave campaign’s false exaltation of the claims of the nation state, and the Leave campaign’s shameful campaign against migrants and refugees. As a pastor and a theologian responsible for the formation of clergy I believe that the Leave campaign and its victory were an attack on the Catholic Church and on authentic Christian beliefs.

The last of those arguments was and is the most important. There is no doubt, from all the available evidence, that the Leave campaign won its narrow victory because of the issue of immigration. The campaign against migrants - people living here from other EU countries, migrants from other parts of the world, and refugees and asylum seekers - was based on fear, hatred and downright lies (the ‘Father of Lies’ was at work), fuelled by unscrupulous newspapers and other parts of the media. As a pastor and a theologian I feel that real hatred was built up, and has not abated. For me the symbol of the whole wretched campaign was the brutal murder in Yorkshire of Jo Cox MP. I was away on school journey with year 6 of our school in Wiltshire when it happened and we prayed for her and her family at one of our daily Masses: it was profoundly depressing.

This was real and tangible evil. It was also totally opposed to the teachings of the Catholic Church, which has for decades identified with the migrant and the refugee, which has repeatedly called, nationally and internationally for the rights of migrants and refugees to be respected; this was forged in the years after the Second World War. I don’t need to lecture you about this because our parish has witnessed so powerfully to the duty to care for refugees for so long - over twenty years, thanks to the witness of Sr Ann Byrne ACI, and this witness is being continued by our new Salesian sisters. The present Holy Father, like his predecessors, has repeatedly called on Europeans to show kindness and compassion to refugees; the Church has always supported freedom of movement with the EU (and the single currency). We are, of course, a Church of migrants, which is why Lord Hattersley wrote what

he did about what Polish migration to this country has done to bolster up our Church since 2004. Although it looks as if most Catholics (unlike most practising Anglicans) voted Remain the blindness about this, especially towards the campaign of hate, of many Catholics is truly astounding: it is part of the ‘cunning of Satan’. Let me quote to you the words of Pope Francis from a consistory in November, not long after the election of Donald Trump, warning about **‘how quickly those among us with the status of a stranger, an immigrant or a refugee, become a threat and take on the status of an enemy...an enemy because they come from a distant country or have different customs. An enemy because of the colour of their skin, their language, or their social class. An enemy because they think differently or even have a different faith....How many wounds grow deeper due to this epidemic of animosity and violence, which leaves its mark on the flesh of many of the defenceless, because their voice is weak and silenced by this pathology of indifference.’**

We live in really dark times - in this country, in the rest of Europe, in the United States. But the gates of hell will not prevail.



Nuclear weapons

Just over eleven years ago, in his first message for World Peace day at the beginning of 2006, Pope Benedict XVI wrote these words: **‘What can be said, too, about those governments which count on nuclear arms as a means of ensuring the security of their countries? Along with countless persons of good will, one can state that this point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims. The truth of peace requires that all —whether those governments which openly or secretly possess nuclear arms, or those planning to acquire them— agree to change their course by clear and firm decisions, and strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament. The resources which would be saved could then be employed in projects of development capable of benefiting all their people, especially the poor.’**

This was (and remains) the strongest and most unambiguous condemnation of the nuclear deterrent from the Catholic Church, although there is a similarly negative view in many authoritative Church documents (see the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*) and many statements (now) from the Bishops of England and Wales and of Scotland . This is consistent - Pope Pius XII roundly condemned the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 - at times local bishops have been rather hesitant: until Vatican II in this country and the United States the most vocal Catholic opponents of nuclear weapons were not clergy or bishops (who kept their heads down) but lay Catholic philosophers such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach. There was a brief period when the Church was prepared to allow nations to keep the weapons as part of the process of disarmament, but because that process has been limited and incomplete we are not saying that any more. I have often talked about this issue here so I don't want to go into the arguments in great detail. Using nuclear weapons would *never* be morally acceptable as they would deliberately kill large numbers of innocent non-combatants; and it can *never* be morally acceptable to intend or threaten to do something which would *always* be wicked.

In Pope Benedict's condemnation - which got very little publicity at the time - the key phrase is that nuclear deterrent theory is '**not only baleful but completely fallacious.**' Fallacious means false, a pack of lies - so here we are with our old adversary, the 'Father of Lies', as with the campaign to take the UK out of Europe. The pope was saying that the deterrent theory is a *moral lie*, resting on falsehood. The Peace movement over the years since the development of nuclear weapons has repeatedly pointed out the mendacity at the heart of this country's defence policies - the lie that these weapons have kept the peace, the lie that they are essential to our national security. The reason I have singled out this issue as one of my three is not that it's a new issue but that the lies carry on; indeed there is less willingness than ever among our political class even to question the whole pack of lies - indeed, as on many other issues, *we are let down* by the majority of Catholic politicians. The economic and strategic arguments are weighty but I am not concerned with them: this is about morality. You cannot be a good Catholic and a believer in this country's nuclear deterrent: the extent to which our possession of these weapons poisons national life cannot be exaggerated. They compromise morally the whole of our armed forces, they compromise what we do to support the armed forces who are often asked to go along with the lies (and this is particularly difficult if - as is true of some families in this parish - we have parishioners who are members of the armed forces, whom we want to care for), they deprive this country of moral authority and standing in the world; they are part and parcel of a growing culture of militarism and the glorification of war, far more marked than in the 60s and 70s when I was young. The seriousness of this issue -rooted, of course, in what we believe about the sanctity of life - demands that we look at where our true loyalties lie and be fearless in exposing lies and the Father of lies.



Attacks on the Holy Father

Commentators on Church affairs are saying rather a lot at the moment about the extent of dissent from many of the teachings and actions of Pope Francis. While this is often said to be ‘unprecedented’ a closer look at history will show that it’s not really true, although the openness of some criticisms of the Holy Father is perhaps unusual in recent history. As Catholics we hold the Bishop of Rome and his ministry as of fundamental importance. On matters of faith and morals, when speaking *ex cathedra*, we believe that he is kept free from error, and at all times we are obliged to follow his teachings, and that of the whole Magisterium, and adhere with ‘religious assent’ to these teachings. So my third example of where we can detect the ‘smell of Satan’ (brimstone) is the ways in which some who claim to be good Catholics are openly undermining the ministry of the Holy Father.

Of course, as I said, this is nothing new. I would cite three examples of how it has happened in the last century to other popes. In the Great War a century ago Pope Benedict was seriously undermined in his opposition to the war, particularly by the bishops in most of the combatant countries, including Britain; it is well attested that St John XXIII was undermined by curial officials, especially in relation to his work for peace at the end of his life, when he was dying of cancer; and there is also evidence that Benedict XVI was also undermined, particularly in relation to his efforts to root out scandals in the Vatican (I also think it odd that his World Peace day message which I quoted earlier, received so little coverage at the time). I am sure there are even worse examples from earlier in the history of the Church.

In the case of Pope Francis opposition to him over the last four years has really focused on three things, apart from people criticising him for not wearing red shoes: (i) the papal encyclical from 2015 *Laudato Si'*, which (you may remember since we had a talk on it) covered care for God’s creation - there was much criticism on some Catholic blogs and the sort of indifference which greets any expression of Catholic Social teaching, (ii) the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (about which I hope to give a talk later in the year), because it delegates to Bishops’ Conferences some discretion about pastoral arrangements for divorced Catholics who have remarried, and (iii) interventions in the Order of Malta.

Now I don’t want to go into these specific issues, the last of which I know very little about. I am more concerned with the general phenomenon of dissent from his ministry and rather open disloyalty -

expressed in terms of statements from cardinals and at one point a horrible poster campaign around the walls of Rome. This isn't at the level of proper and respectful debate - much of it is snide and underhand; the proponents of dissent put forward a totally false view of significant difference between Pope Francis and his immediate predecessors (if you want to know how false it is, read the latest published interviews given by Pope Emeritus Benedict); it is malign and, as far as I can see, in the same category as the two earlier examples I gave of evil in the world. This, of course, is deep within the Church itself so we should perhaps be even more alarmed: it is designed to undermine much of the Holy Father's ministry specifically in relation to the earlier two issues - his witness for the poor of the world, for refugees, for peace and reconciliation.

Conclusion

This brings me to a sobering conclusion - for as far as Catholics are concerned, those who put forward the three malign approaches I have identified - xenophobia, indifference in relation to nuclear weapons, or even support for them, and opposition to the pope - are the same people. When we see the effects of real moral evil, of course, we should not start fighting a crusade or indulge in lack of charity: our job is expose darkness and error and try and lead people towards the truth; but we do have to 'speak the truth in love.' Perhaps the best way to do this to discern signs of light and goodness, even in difficult times, and that is what we will try to do next week.