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"Never converse with the devil: raise your heart to God"

In his 25 September general audience, Pope Francis continued catechetical cycle on how the Holy Spirit guides the People of God through salvation history, speaking about the Holy Spirit, our ally in the fight against the spirit of evil.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Immediately after His baptism in the Jordan, Jesus “*was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*” (Mt 4:1) – this is what the Gospel of Matthew says. The initiative is not Satan’s, but God’s. Going into the wilderness, Jesus obeys an inspiration of the Holy Spirit; He does not fall into an enemy snare, no, no! Once He has withstood the test, it is written, He returns to Galilee “in the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4:14).

In the wilderness, Jesus freed Himself *of* Satan, and now He can deliver *from* Satan. He freed Himself, He frees from Satan. It is what the Evangelists highlight with the numerous studies of deliverance from possession. Jesus says to His opponents: “If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt 12:28). And Jesus casts out

the demons, with the aspiration of the kingdom of God.

Nowadays we are witnessing a strange phenomenon regarding the devil. At a certain cultural level, it is held that he simply does not exist. He would be a symbol of the collective subconscious, or alienation; in short, a metaphor. But “the cleverest ruse of the devil is to persuade you he does not exist!”, as someone wrote (Charles Baudelaire). He is astute: he makes us believe that he does not exist, and in this way he dominates everything. He is cunning. And yet our technological and secularized world is teeming with magicians, occultism, spiritualism, astrologers, sellers of spells and amulets, and unfortunately with real satanic sects. Driven out the door, the devil has re-entered, one might say, through the window. Driven out of faith, he re-enters with superstition. And if you are superstitious, you are

unconsciously conversing with the devil. One does not converse with the devil.

The strongest proof of the existence of Satan is found not in sinners or the possessed, but in the saints! “And how can this be, Father?” Yes, it is true that the devil is present and working in certain extreme and “inhuman” forms of evil and wickedness that we see around us. But by this route, though, it is practically impossible to reach, in individual cases, the certainty that it is truly him, given that we cannot know with precision where his action ends and our own evil begins. This is why the Church is so prudent and so rigorous in performing exorcism, unlike what happens, unfortunately, in certain films!

It is in the life of the saints, precisely there, that the devil is forced to come out into the open, to place himself

“against the light.” All the saints, all the great believers, some more, some less, testify to their struggle with this obscure reality, and one cannot honestly assume that they were all deluded or mere victims of the prejudices of their time.

The battle against the spirit of evil is won as Jesus won it in the wilderness: by striking with the word of God. You see that Jesus does not converse with the devil, He never conversed with the devil. Either he casts him out, or condemns him, but He never converses. And in the wilderness, he replies not with His word, but with the Word of God. Brothers, sisters, never converse with the devil; when temptations present themselves: “But, this would be nice, that would be nice” – stop. Raise your heart to the Lord, pray to Our Lady and banish him, just as Jesus taught us how to banish him. Saint Peter also suggests another

means, that Jesus did not need, but we do – vigilance. “Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (*1 Pt* 5:8). And Saint Paul says to us: “Give no opportunity to the devil” (*Eph* 4:27).

After Christ, on the cross, defeated forever the power of the “ruler of this world” (*Jn* 12:31), a Father of the Church said, “the devil is bound, like a dog on a chain; he cannot bite anyone except those who, defying the danger, go near him... He can bark, he can urge, but he can bite only those who want” [1]. If you are a fool and you go to the devil and say, “Ah, how are you?”, and everything, it ruins you. The devil – distance. One does not converse with the devil. One banishes him. Distance. And all of us, everyone, we have experience of how the devil approaches with some temptation. The temptation of the ten

commandments: when we feel this, stop, keep your distance: do not approach the chained dog.

Modern technology, for example, besides the many positive resources that are to be appreciated, offers also countless means to “give an opportunity to the devil”, and many fall in the trap. Think of online pornography, behind which there is a flourishing market: we all know this. It is the devil at work, there. And this is a very widespread phenomenon, which Christians should beware of and strongly reject. Because any smartphone has access to this brutality, to this language of the devil: online pornography.

Awareness of the action of the devil in history should not discourage us. The final thought must be, also in this case, of trust and security: “I am with the Lord, be gone”. Christ overcame the devil and gave us the

Holy Spirit to make His victory our own. The very action of the enemy can turn to our advantage, if with God's help we make it serve our purification. Let us therefore ask the Holy Spirit, in the words of the hymn *Veni Creator*:

Drive far away our wily Foe,
And Thine abiding peace bestow;
If Thou be our protecting Guide,
No evil can our steps betide”.

Beware, the devil is astute – but we Christians, with God’s grace, are more astute than him. Thank you.

[1] Saint Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons* 121, 6: CC 103, p. 507.

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