
The main targets of darkness

“Father Callahan?”, the voice asked teasingly, and he jumped as Ben had a moment earlier. ‘Are you there? Pardonnez-moi, I cannot see you. Have they persuaded you to come? Perhaps so. I have observed you at some length since I arrived in Momson... much as a good chess player will study the games of his opposition, eh? The Catholic Church is not the oldest of my adversaries, no! I was old even when it was young, this claque which you and your followers venerate so for its antiquity. This simpering club of bread-eaters and wine-drinkers who venerate the sheep-savour. Yet I do not underestimate. I am wise in the ways of goodness as well as evil. I am not jaded. Even now I love the game as well as the price, so I do not underestimate. So how do I see you? Better, perhaps, than you see yourself. Braver. How is your word? Courage? No. Spanish is machismo. Much-man. [...] These others... fut, I spit on them. When I am ready, I will take them one by one and break them. It is only you I fear, coupled to your Church. [...] Yet I will best you”, the voice added, almost as an afterthought. “How? You say. Do I not bear the symbol of White? Can I not move in the day as well as in the night? Are there not charms and potions, both Christian and pagan, which my so-good friend Matthew Burke has informed me of? Yes, yes, and yes. But I have lived longer than you. I am crafty. I am not the serpent. I am the father of serpents. Still, you say, ‘this is not enough’. And it is not. In the end, it is your own wretched faith that will undo you. It is weak...soft...rotten. It is no longer a defense against the evils that are in your world, if it ever was. You yourself, acolyte and preserver of the flame that you guard. You preach of love and there is no love. I spit on love! [...] Goodness, dear Father, requires the act of faith. Evil requires only that one wait. It is loose in the world, as omnipresent as the wind. You know that, but you do not know of good. And when the moment comes, it will be check to the king... and black wins all!” The one speaking is devilish Barlow, the fictional vampire of Stephen King’s “Salem’s Lot”, in a recorded message to his antagonists and vampire-hunters. In the above passages he is directly addressing the parish priest of the town he chose as the site of a carnage. This passage comes to mind whenever I hear or read the news of a confrere who has fallen into the snares of some scandalous or even criminal sin, as in the recent case of Fr Francesco Spagnesi from Prato diocese.

Oh yes, indeed, the “father of serpents” studies us priests one by one. It is his job: “to tempt” in fact means “to attempt by enticing”:

“The conduct of the evil one may also be compared to the tactics of a leader intent upon seizing and plundering a position he desires. A commander and leader of an army will encamp, explore the fortifications and defenses of the stronghold, and attack at the weakest point. In the same way, the enemy of our human nature investigates from every side all our virtues, theological, cardinal and moral. Where he finds the defenses of eternal salvation weakest and most deficient, there he attacks and tries to take us by storm.” (Saint Ignatius of Loyola, “Spiritual Exercises” n°. 327). But sure, of course, he does it with every Christian, by all means! No one denies it... the fact remains that, like the ancient Roman emperors, who martyred presbyters and bishops first, so the evil one is targeting us priests first and foremost, and that's because if you strike the shepherd, the sheep of the flock will be scattered (cf. Mt 26: 31) and also because he cannot bear that beings of flesh and blood should have powers equal and opposite to his own - indeed even greater! When we choose to live our vocation to the full, as priests we cannot but be thorns in the side of the Prince of Darkness, for God has given us the gift for our brothers and sisters to wash where he sullies, to build where he demolishes, to heal where he infects, to bring light where he extinguishes it. *How many times, during spiritual direction encounters and confessions, have I felt as if I were playing the aforementioned chess game, tempting my interlocutor to do good with the Word that comes from God, while the Adversary tempted him to do evil deeds with dreary and fearful thoughts! The accuser and the spiritual director: two tempters placed at opposite ends of the sanctuary of individual freedom.* And yet, in this struggle between light

and darkness, each and every day we experience the overpowering and overwhelming Grace, whose works are impossible for us alone - because as priests we are and remain mere mortals, bound by limitations, weakness and sin. That is where, in our bare nature as mortals, the Enemy constantly attacks us, where we, just like all human beings, are perpetually poised between salvation and perdition, between hope and despair. And it is also there that vigilance, humbleness, acceptance of our limitations are needed from us, because 'the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak' (Mk 14:38). When we cease to be vigilant, assuming that God's side is ours, we fall face first into the mud... and like everyone else, whether it be you reading or me writing, we have to get up again. Perhaps this is precisely what the Enemy can least endure: God not tiring of us, not binding the effectiveness of our priesthood to our qualities, but rather fulfilling our role in the work of Salvation with very poor instruments. Perhaps that's precisely why he tries so hard to crush us, because God's infinite humbleness is inconceivable and intolerable to the father of pride. The humbleness of God who loved this poor priest scarred by evil and alienation, and who assured the validity of his sacramental services in exactly the same way as He assured those of Saint Pius of Pietrelcina or the Curé d'Ars. *That very humility should at least inspire Christians to take pity on a priest who falls, and to examine their consciences: do we pray for our priests? Do we care for their loneliness, which they have chosen in order to serve us? Do we conceal ourselves in complacent clericalism, which enables a disinterested distance under the guise of respect, or are we able to see in this priest a brother, a father, a son, a man in need of love?* Of course, this does not justify the serious sins and crimes of some priests, but the point is that Christians cannot apply the categories used by the world in general, whose overzealous advocacy of justice will lead to perdition anyway, and will be nailed down for exactly what it blames others for. There is little to be scandalised about: while there is need for reparation, including legal and criminal reparation, in response to an evil deed, there is also need for the kind of realism that can only be found in those who are imbued with the Spirit of Christ, the realism of recognising that we are all sinners, all needing watchful care, mutual help, and forgiveness. All of us are exposed to the relentless ambush of darkness... and priests even more so, for they are always on the front line and, by accepting to live a wholly different life, they are challenge the Enemy head-on every day in the depths of the souls of those entrusted to them, and in their own souls.

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