

Letter from Bulletin of August 3, 2003

Dear Parishioners,

“The devil, you say!”, as promised, as the summer heat continues, I’ll share a few thoughts on **the devil**.

Contrary to media wisdom, a belief in the devil is widespread, even among the nation’s best educated. Two polls released in March (Gallup and Harris) agree that belief in “the devil” is as high in the U.S. as it’s ever been since they began asking the question in the 1950’s. Both polls reported the same 68% number well over the 51% reported a dozen years ago. Neither of the polls try to define what people mean by the “devil”. In a 1978 poll Gallup found that half the respondents were talking about “a personal being who directs evil forces and influences people to do wrong”; while the other half describes the devil as “an impersonal force that influences people to do wrong”.

The Bible, surprisingly, gives us considerably less help than we might expect when it comes to “devil-talk”. The devil is not an important figure in the Old Testament. The word appears in only five books (out of 46) and is mentioned only once in four of them. The famous snake in the Garden of Eden was not meant to symbolize the devil, and in the story of Job the character called Satan acts as a court appointed attorney to present human failings to a heavenly tribunal. Satan is not equal to God and not described as an evil power.

The devil is much more active in the New Testament. The Gospel writers use terms like “Evil One”, “Father of Lies”, “Murderer from the Beginning” as well as devil. The devil seems to have limited power to cause sickness and the temptation to sin. However it cannot cause moral wrongs or corruption, does not know Christ’s true identity and must obey the word of Christ and his disciples. The New Testament indicates that it is difficult to

separate the evil that results from devils and that which results from human choice, but in any case the coming of Christ overwhelms the power of the devil.

Reference to the devil appears very seldom in official Catholic statements of faith and the devil is not mentioned in any official Christian creed.

Personally I think belief in “the devil” is often either understated or overstated.

Understated – If we still carry around that cartoon figure of a fork pitch and red tailed devil whispering in people’s ears, I think we underestimate by far the cosmic power that undermines our best instincts and multiplies the evil we do with demonic force. Evil is real; its consequences can be enormous and it often increases almost geometrically.

Overstated – To think that power of evil is an equal factor with the power of God is to misunderstand both the gospel and the universe of God’s creation. To attribute our evil choices to an outside agent (“the devil made me do it”), is to duck our own very real responsibility for good and bad in the world.

One of my favorite quotes is attributed to C.S. Lewis who wrote that marvelous little book “The Screwtape Letters” where the older devil “Uncle Screwtape” advises his nephew devil “Wormword” on how best to tempt people and lead people astray. When complimented on his insights about the work of the devil, Lewis is said to have responded, “Oh that book is not about the devil, no it’s about the human heart!”

Your Pastor,
Brian Joyce