

What are Possession and Obsession by the Devil? **by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.**

Our present conference is a change of pace from our conferences so far. We have been reflecting mainly on the angels, as such, and have seen something of what happened at the dawn of angelic creation. Some of the angelic hosts remain faithful to God. Others rebelled against the Creator and became demons.

We have also seen that the angels are not just in a world by themselves. The faithful spirits are angels precisely because they are messengers of God to guide our minds and direct our wills towards that heavenly destiny for which we are made. The rebellious spirits have been allowed, from the dawn of human history to tempt human beings away from their loyalty to God and thus lead men into sin.

Our present conference is very specific. We are asking ourselves only one specific question: What are possession and obsession by the devil?

It might be well at the outset to distinguish between the constant temptations to which we are all exposed by the evil spirit, and the more severe demonic molestation's which we have come to call possession and obsession.

Before going into a more detailed explanation, it might be well to just briefly define possession and obsession and distinguish how they differ from one another.

When the devil attacks the body of a human being from the outside, we call this obsession. When, however, the evil spirit assumes control of a human soul from within, we call that possession.

It seems better for our purpose to first speak of "possession" in general, without distinguishing between what we technically call obsessions and what are complete control by the evil spirit. In a separate section we shall deal with obsessions which are, you might say incomplete diabolical possessions.

Demonic Possessions in the Bible

In the Old Testament we have only one instance of what may be called possession, although there is some doubt whether it was a diabolical possession in the full sense.

In the first book in Kings we are told that “an evil spirit from the Lord troubled” Saul (1 Kings 16:14). Jewish tradition commonly identifies Saul’s condition as being possessed by the evil spirit, as seen from his envious hatred of David whom he tried to murder.

The moment we enter into the New Testament, demonic possessions become an integral part of biblical history. A word of comment on this phenomenon should be made. Over the two thousand years of Christianity, whenever the Gospel began to be preached among a certain people, the devil has consistently become very active in resisting the proclamation of the Good News.

There is almost no limit to the number and variety of diabolical possessions recorded in the Gospels alone. The victims of the devil were sometimes deprived of sight and speech alone (Matthew 12:22). At other times the victims lost only their speech (Matthew 9:32). Again the victims who were afflicted by the devil without being specified just how (Luke 8:2).

In most cases, there is no mention of any bodily affliction beyond the possession itself (Matthew 4:21, Mark 1:32, Luke 4:41).

The effects of possession are described in various passages. A man is possessed by a spirit “who, wherever he takes him, dashes him, and immediately gnashes with his teeth and pines away...and often casts him into the fire and into waters to destroy him” (Mark 9:17, 21). The possessed persons are sometimes gifted with superhuman powers as, for instance, “This man lived in the tombs and no one could any longer bind him, even with chains; for often he had been bound with fetters and chains, and he had rent the chains asunder and broken the fetters into pieces” (Mark 5:3-4).

Some of the possessed were controlled by several demons (Mark 12:43). In one case so many devils possessed a man that their name was Legion.

Nevertheless, as evil as the possessing spirits were they could not help testifying to Christ's divine mission (Matthew 8:29). In fact, they continued to testify to our Lord's divinity even after Christ's ascension (Acts 16:16-18).

There is more than passing value in referring to possessions in the New Testament because this testifies to the authenticity of these phenomena. It also provides the grounds for the continued possessions that have plagued human history since the close of the Apostolic Age.

Possessions in the Early Church and the Middle Ages

The history of the early Church is filled with instances of diabolical agency. A single quotation from Tertullian (second and third century) gives us some idea what this meant.

Let a person be brought before your tribunals who is plainly under demoniacal possession. The wicked spirit, bidden to speak by the followers of Christ, will as readily make the truthful confession that he is a demon as elsewhere is falsely asserted that he is a god.

What clearer proof that a work like that? What more trustworthy than such a proof? The simplicity of truth is thus put forth; its own worth sustains it; no ground remains for the least suspicion. Do you say that it is done by magic or some trick of that sort? You will not say anything like that if you have been allowed the use of your ears and eyes.

Many of the early councils of the Church legislated on the subject of possession. They decreed on the proper way that possessed persons should be treated. They prescribed public penance for catechumens and fallen Christians who were believed to be under the special influence of the evil spirit.

All through the Middle Ages the Church made regulations and prescribed penalties against those who invited the influence of the devil or used it to inflict injury on other people. We have solemn documents by Pope Innocent VIII, 1484; Julius II, 1504; and Adrian VI, 1523; on the subject of possession. So serious had the situation become at the dawn of Protestantism, that every Catholic priest was given the power of exorcism.

Not only was demonic possession accepted by Catholic Christians but we have record of criminal investigations in which charges of witchcraft or

diabolical possession. The writings on this subject come, all historically verified, would fill volumes.

Demonic Possession in Modern Times

Possession by the evil spirit has continued unabated over the centuries. Formal exorcisms on possessed persons are performed in the city of Rome. In my conversations with the exorcists, I have been assured that the frequency of demonic possession is more common than most people suppose.

In a later conference we shall examine the norms which the Church uses to distinguish an authentic possession by the evil spirit from a phenomenon that could be psycho-pathological.

Understandably there is not a great deal of publicly available documentation on authentic possessions. The last thing the Church wants is to give the devil publicity.

In recent years, professional studies have been made by Catholic scholars on what might be called the norms for identifying actual demonic possession. We keep in mind that possession means the devil's control of the body of a human being. Also to be remembered is that the external phenomena of possession may resemble symptoms of psychic disturbance or disease. The risk is that a person who shows psychological disturbance will be dismissed as a mere psychotic and not consider to be under the demonic influence.

Specialists in the study of possession distinguish between two kinds of possessions. Some possessions manifest psychiatric phenomena; others manifest phenomena that are beyond psychiatric analysis.

Possessions that Parallel Psychiatric Changes. Persons who are possessed can manifest bodily changes which are familiar in the science of psychiatry. The devil exercises control over their bodies by using them as he wills. He may immobilize the self-control of the individual. It is, so to speak, "a change of command." The possessed body moves, speaks and acts but is no longer under the control of the individual. It is now directed and manipulated as a blind instrument, obeying a stronger power or personality that forcibly dominates it. The human person is no longer the one who acts; it is rather the devil acting through the body of the individual.

Possessed persons in their external behavior will manifest phenomena that are very similar to those of certain mental illnesses, characterized by dual personality or the presence of an internal principle that causes the abnormal behavior.

But in cases of possession there will always be the strong aversion to the sacred or anything that was a source of spiritual consolation before the possession. In many cases this aversion may extend to the moral and physical order.

In cases of real diabolical possession, the individual may give evidence of his or her abnormal state by facial changes and distortions, by complete relaxation or by rigidity of the body. When asked to perform some act of piety or devotion, the possessed person will always react in a more or less violent manner with contortions of bodily members, threats, and frightening shouts, or with provocative blasphemies and sacrilegious bodily movements. At other times, the possessed victim may try to put an end to the requests and expectations by lapsing into a state of complete passivity. At the persistent repeated command, "In the name of God," to perform some act of devotion, such as kissing a holy image or genuflecting, the possessed person may obey, but will do so with great repugnance and even with contempt for the person who commands it.

This diabolical repugnance to anything sacred is also expressed in relation to what had once been a source of moral or physical relief to the individual. Then the possessed person becomes withdrawn, avoids the company of others, and refuses to engage in conversation. The one possessed may hardly be able to express his or her wishes and the bodily functions may be seriously affected.

All that we have so far said about this kind of possession may resemble a psychopathological condition. However, one prime key to distinguish possession from psychopathology is the universal opposition, even hatred of everything which has to do with God, or the Eucharist, or the Blessed Virgin, or the saints or, in general, whatever is sacred.

Possessions that are Beyond Psychological Explanation. In the second form of possession, it is the devil who is the direct active agent. The power he

exercises in the possessed person is beyond the capacity of any human being.

The following are some of the phenomena that characterize this more extreme form of possession. The possessed person is unable to maintain a stable posture or to move around or is able to carry out certain functions or activities which the individual had never learned before. The variety of these activities is beyond counting. It may involve the ability to sing or to paint or speak or understand foreign languages which had never been learned. The one possessed may acquire the knowledge of persons, objects, or events that are long past, hidden, or at a great distance. At other times, the person will rise from the ground and remain suspended in the air in the levitation or will move through the air or perform amazing bodily feats. Or again, he or she will be able to move heavy objects or furniture without touching them, or cause these objects to rise above the ground. Under the influence of the devil, a person is able to open or close doors or windows from a distance, cause huge paintings to fall from the walls, shattering objects at a great distance.

To be emphasized is that this type of possession is entirely different from what we are calling psychic possession. This one is beyond all psychological power.

Before we leave our reflections on demonic possession, no matter what type it assumes, one thing must be reemphasized. What is never absent in a possessed person is the inhuman hatred of anything having to do with God.

In one of my conversations with an exorcist in Rome, he told me of a seventeen-year-old girl whom he was exorcising. She belonged to the second class of possessed persons.

The priest exorcist wanted the possessed woman to attend a Mass which he was to offer for her deliverance from the evil spirit. It took five strong men to be able to move her bodily into the chapel and seat her in the last row.

After the second consecration, as the priest lifted the chalice for the elevation, the possessed girl spat from the back of the chapel, at least sixty feet from the altar. Her spittle struck the chalice the moment it was elevated. There was no physical possibility for the woman's saliva to travel that distance in a straight line and strike the chalice with the Precious Blood the

way it did. During her protracted exorcism, she exhibited a demonic hatred of the Eucharist.

Before we finish this part of our conference, I must repeat that the phenomena exhibited by possessed people may have all the signs of psychopathology. But one phenomena is unique: a virulent detestation of everything divine.

Diabolical Obsession

At the opening of this conference, we distinguished obsession from possession as demonic influence from outside of the obsessed person.

We know on faith that God permits the evil spirit to exercise influence in the material world. We also know that people who practice sorcery can cause phenomenal effects either on other persons or the elements of nature or in scores of other ways that are part of verifiable history.

For our purpose, I thought the wisest thing would be to share with you how the devil can cause obsession, and specifically in the life of St. John Vianney, popularly know as the Cure of Ars.

The most authentic life of the Cure of Ars was published by Francis Trochu. This biography is based on the manuscript data from the process of beatification of John Vianney.

In his earlier years in the priesthood, Vianney experienced some strange things going on in his rectory. He had no idea where the sounds at night or the curious happenings were coming from. But soon he would find out.

After several nights of strange pounding and noise, he asked one of his parishioners to spend the night with him at the rectory. The Cure gave his visitor his own bed to sleep in. Thinking that the noises were coming from thieves, the man brought a loaded gun with him to the presbytery.

That night nothing happened until after midnight. What follows is the deposition which this parishioner gave at the canonical process for the beatification of the Cure of Ars.

At about one o'clock, I heard a violent shaking of the handle and lock of the front door. At the same time, heavy blows were struck as if with a club, against the same door, while within the presbytery there was a terrific din, like the rumbling of several carts.

I seized my gun and rushed to the window, which I threw open. I look out but saw nothing. For nearly a quarter of an hour the house shook - so did my legs. I felt the effects of that night for a fortnight. As soon as the noise had started, the Cure lit a lamp. He accompanied me.

"Have you heard?" he asked.

"You can see that I have heard, since I am up and have my gun." And all the time the presbytery was shaking as in an earthquake.

"So you are afraid?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

"I am not afraid, but I feel my legs giving way under me. The presbytery is going to crash to the ground."

"What do you think it is?"

"I think it is the devil."

When the uproar ceased we returned to bed. The following evening, the Cure came again to ask me to keep him company. I replied, "Monsieur Cure, I have had quite enough."

The experience just described continued for the rest of the life of the Cure of Ars. For years on end, the devil molested, disturbed, and tormented, John Vianney relentlessly.

Literally thousands of words have been printed giving in detail what the saintly pastor of Ars had to undergo from the evil spirit.

We call this demonic obsession. Everything which the devil did in the life of St. John Vianney had one obvious purpose. It was to prevent Vianney from exercising the phenomenal good for souls which has become part of the history of the Church in modern times.

We may therefore describe obsession as the devil's phenomenal power to hinder and, if possible, prevent spiritual good for souls.

Conclusion

The subject of demonic possession and obsession is an ocean in size. What needs to be stressed, however, is that both forms of the devil's influence in human lives are more prevalent than most people imagine.

What we are seeing in the modern world is not only phenomenal diabolical obsession or possession. Both of these can be, and we may say generally are, inculpable on the part of those who have to endure the devil's cruelty.

In our day we are seeing the devil being literally invoked by people. They actually venerate and worship the evil spirit.

This is a subject all by itself. We call it Satanism.

Prayer

“Mary, Mother of God, obtain from your divine Son the grace we need to recognize the work of the evil spirit in human lives. We ask you to intercede for us that we may not be afraid of the devil who is so active in our day.”

“Mary, Queen of Angels, pray for us.”

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