

DEMONIC POSSESSION,—A POSSIBILITY

MATTHEW M. McGLYNN, O.P.



HE records of religion among savage and cultured peoples alike, show a striking universality of belief in the existence and operations of evil spirits, particularly in that kind of operation known as "possession." The fact and possibility of possession, or the inhabitation and control of a human body by a demon is something one must accept with the New Testament, with faith in Christ. Exorcisms are bound up with the integrity of the Gospels and with the facts of Our Lord's life.

Rationalism has tried to explain away, both the universal beliefs of mankind and the facts on which it is based, making no discrimination between pagan and Christian demonology, but accounting all credence in devils and diabolical influence as superstition. Underneath this charge of superstition may generally be found the assumption that devils are a sort of puerile invention—beings quite as fabulous as fairies and goblins—to be numbered among those "things of a child" which civilization has discarded on coming of intellectual manhood.

That there have been superstitions about devils, no one can deny. There have been superstitions about God too. But it is bad logic to deny to God, or for that matter to any being, the right to exist, simply because he has been falsely or inadequately apprehended. The foolish ideas men have held about devils, then, are not enough to condemn belief in their existence and influence, unless, perchance, all ideas about devils are foolish. But such is not the case. Catholic demonology is really sane, coherent and scientific. The concepts of demons and the explanation of their action given by St. Thomas in the *Summa Theologica* are thoroughly reasonable and upset the assumption that diabolical existence and influence are absurd. We shall attempt briefly to outline this doctrine with special reference to the possibility of demonic possession.

The word demon was used by some of the Greek philosophers to signify an inferior god or goddess. All demons were not considered evil. Some were benevolent exercising an office analogous to

that of our Guardian Angel. In the Greek of the New Testament, however, and throughout Catholic Theology, the word bears the evil signification only. Devil is sometimes used interchangeably with demon, but for the most part, it denotes Satan, the prince of demons.

The Catholic teaching is that a demon is by nature an *angel*, and by his own free act, a *fallen* angel. So, the steps to an understanding of the possibility of demonic possession are: first, the existence of angels; secondly, the existence of fallen angels; thirdly, the reason for the malevolence of fallen angels—and finally their capability of exercising this malevolence to the detriment of man.

An angel is an incorporeal or spiritual, personal being, endowed with intellect and free will, situated in a plane of perfection superior to man. The fact of angelic existence is manifestly contained in Holy Scripture—and the doctrine has been defined by the Fourth Lateran and the Vatican Councils. St. Thomas brings reason to the explanation of revelation in an argument showing the reasonableness of the existence of angels or “intellectual substances.”¹ They are needed, as it were, to fill out the perfection of the universe intended by the creator. Things are more and more perfect as they approach closer and closer in likeness to God, the Fountainhead of all being and perfection. The closest a creature can come to God is to resemble Him in the very perfection by which He produces things, namely, intellect and will. This resemblance is to be found perfectly only in a creature of pure intellect and will—an intellectual substance—an angel. Therefore, if the universe contains the highest possible kind of nature, (which is very fitting, albeit not necessary), angels exist.

While the certainty of angelic existence is assured from revelation only, reason suffers not the least violence in assenting to it. God's infinite power can call into being anything which involves no contradiction and there is nothing contradictory in a nature superior to the human, entirely free from the body with its limitations, having a pure intellect and will. In fact, reason, being able to arrive at a notion of a being thus nobly endowed, ought to be delighted to learn through faith that such a being really exists. Incidentally the existence of an incomprehensible number of creatures so perfect may mitigate the shock which staggers the mind when it contemplates the evils of our little visible world.

To show there is no absurdity in the idea of a *fallen* angel, we need but to add that any creature with a free will can, according to the condition of its nature, be deficient in its action, that is to say, can

¹ St. Thomas *Summa Theologica*, P. I., Q. 50, a. 1.

commit sin. The only will which cannot sin is the Divine Will, because only the Divine Will is the rule or measure of its own action.² Similarly, a carpenter can be deficient in sawing a piece of wood, because his action is not the final norm determining how wood must be sawed. If the action of sawing could not go wrong, this would be only because the action was conformed to the rule of right sawing by its very nature which is another way of saying that the action and the rule would have to be identified. As for the fact that some angels have sinned, which is the same as saying that demons exist, this is also a matter of faith, revealed in Scripture and defined by the Church.³

The problem of the fall of Satan and his followers, with its many intricacies, we need not consider here, since we are concerned chiefly with the possibility of demonic agency. Briefly—the church teaches that demons were created in innocence and became evil by their own free act. The causes, constituents and effects of that act have been subjects of exhaustive theology treatises and controversies. The principal points of the Angelic Doctor's teaching may be thus stated: the devil was created probably in grace, as opposed to a state of mere nature.⁴ In the first free act which he elicited immediately after the first instant of his creation, he sinned⁵ and caused by way of exhortation, the sin of the other angels in the same instant.⁶ Lapse of time is unnecessary for angelic intimation and consent. The sin of satan was pride. (ib. a. 2) The precise object of that pride is uncertain. It is known that he desired to be as God.⁷ By way of elimination we arrive at two possible explanations of this desire: either he spurned the gratuitous supernatural happiness offered him by God, and preferred the beatitude which he could attain by virtue of his nature alone—or he desired to have that likeness to God which comes of grace, without the help of God. Sin for him was like death for man—the end of probation—not because the sin was too great to be forgiven but because by its nature the angelic will must stand for-

² loc. cit. Q. 63, a. 1.

³ In regard to cases of possession and obsession there are many factual evidences (offering various degrees of probability) particularly the phenomena of spiritism which substantiates Catholic doctrine on this point. But to consider them here would be to go beyond the scope of our paper which proposes only to explain the rational possibility of demoniacal possession.

⁴ I. c. Q. 62, a. 3.

⁵ ib. q. 63, a. 6.

⁶ ib. a. 8.

⁷ Is. ch. 14, v. 14.

ever unchanged and unchangeable in its first choice.⁸ The consequences of this choice have been for satan and his angels, endless pain and for mankind the efficient hatred of an envious foe.

Envy in the fallen angels is but the logical sequel of their pride, for whoever exalts self above others, is saddened when excelled by others. Hence they desire and strive by all means to deprive men of that excellence most humiliating to themselves—eternal happiness.

So much for demonic existence and malice. But why is man exposed to the assaults of that malice and on the part of demons how can it be exercised in the manner described in the New Testament under the name, "possession?"

The Council of Trent teaches that mankind became captive in the empire of satan by original sin. Three factors explain this bondage: the sin of man, the justice of God and the malice of satan.⁹ Through His passion and death, Christ has freed men from this slavery, by obtaining remission of their sins, by reconciling them with God and by thwarting the malice of Satan, which in its excess planned unwittingly the redeeming death. Therefore did Our Lord say when He took leave of His disciples, to enter into His agony, "Now shall the prince of this world be cast out."¹⁰ Only by virtue of the passion of Christ is it possible that any man overcome satan so as to escape eternal death."¹¹

As regards possession, the Gospel texts admit of only one interpretation, the one always taught by the Church, namely, that by possession demons are actually *in* the demoniacs using their bodies as instruments.¹² But how can a devil be in a person? How can a devil act upon a person? These questions are closely connected, and answering the second we answer the first also.

Keeping in mind the angelic nature of demons, we observe that they are entirely incorporeal and, therefore, incapable of being in place in the manner that bodies are, as water in a vase, or a table in a room. For this, is required quantity, which, giving extension to a body, allows it to be measured by contact with the material surface which surrounds it. Angels have no dimensive quantity, because they have no bodies. Nor can they be in the possessed as something intrinsic—either as substantial forms, because they are essentially

⁸ Summa Theol. P. 1, q. 64, a. 2.

⁹ op. cit. P. 3, q. 49, a2.

¹⁰ John Ch. 12, v. 31.

¹¹ Summa Theol. P. 3, q. 49, a. 2 ad 2um.

¹² By this presence *in* the subject, possession differs from obsession. The latter term is properly applied only to diabolical assaults *from outside* the *person obsessed* as apparitions or the preternatural moving of material objects.

spiritual,—or as accidental forms, because they are essentially substantial. How then? St. Thomas tells us,¹³ “By the application of the angelic power to any place whatsoever. An angel is said to be in corporeal place.” A devil is *in* the one he possesses, therefore, by *acting upon* him and in no other way.

But how is this? What is the angelic power with regard to man and what are its limitations?

Angels are able to cause local motion in bodies (loc. cit. q. 110, a. 3.). This appears from the gradation of perfections in the universe, wherein divine wisdom has ordained that the highest perfection of a lower order be possessed by the order superior to it. The vegetation of plants is attained in the nutritive life of the brute kingdom whose highest perfection, sensation is in turn attained by man. The highest perfection of corporeal nature in general, which is local motion, must fall, therefore, within the power of the superior nature which is spiritual. This truth is illustrated in the soul of man which moves the body, as St. Thomas says, “first and foremost by local motion.” The connection between local motion in sense organs and sense perception is most intimate, and being able to arrange and move the particles of sense organs at will, an angel can induce sense impressions, imaginations and emotions with facility.¹⁴ Through this power angels may move the external members of the body also. So by reason of their natural endowments, demons are capable of despotic rule over all that is animal in man. Here precisely their power terminates. They cannot invade the spiritual part of man whose intellect is in the custody of free will, which, in turn, is subject to God alone in its operations.¹⁵

In demoniacs, therefore, demons are present by their action, which consists in moving corporeal faculties and members. Viewed physically this action is the same when devils directly tempt persons to sin. It is the motion of particles in the organ of the imagination which causes perceptions, these, in turn, lend themselves as matter to the intellect; sinful deeds, suggested by these images, are then considered by the intellect and presented to the will for acceptance or rejection, and the temptation is complete. The devil by his physical action on organic matter merely sets things in motion. His attack upon the will

¹³ op. cit. P. I. q. 52, a. 1.

¹⁴ l. c. q. 111, a. 3.

¹⁵ l. c. Q. 57, a. 4. “The devil is not the cause of sin directly or sufficiently but only by way of persuading or proposing a desirable object,” says St. Thomas.

¹⁶ op. cit. P. Ia, 2ae, q. 80, a. 1.

is thus, indirect—and however powerful the assault may be, the will retains its freedom. The devil can in no way induce man to sin of necessity.¹⁷ But, since devils are present wherever they act they are truly present to those whom they tempt in this manner. Possession is not different from temptation by a different kind of physical energy brought to bear in either case, because in both, demons act by moving matter locally. However, possession and temptation differ in this that the former consists only in demonic control of the body and not, as does the latter, in an inducement to sin. Temptation presupposes actual freedom of judgment and volition in the one tempted. But possession seems to be so captivating upon the body as to impede rational motion and render the victim for the time, incapable of moral action—as it were, mere beast—a slave subject to the cruel commands of personal maleficence—to be buffeted, tossed about, torn, cut, deafened or blinded, or used as a mouthpiece according as the ingenuity of the possessing demon or demons may dictate. This action extends so far and only so far a God permits for the working out of His inscrutable designs.

In fine, demons and demonic possession are in accord with reason. There is reason for the existence of demons, because they are angels by nature—for their sin, because they are free agents—for their hatred of man, because they are proud and envious,—for their power to tempt and to possess, because they have command over matter on account of their spiritual excellence,—for the exercise of that power, because God has permitted it as a just penalty for the sin of man and too, as a means of merit for the virtuous who are exercised in conflict with the powers of darkness.

Why cases of possession were so common in the time of Christ we do not know with certainty. Perhaps God was letting the devil make a final show of strength before his downfall on Calvary, the better to demonstrate to the world the divinity of His Son. Evidences of demonic possession are not lacking to-day, especially in pagan countries. That a great part of the civilized world has abandoned belief in diabolical influence ought not to surprise us when we remember that Satan desires above all the perdition of souls. Should he not be willing to lie hid, if by doing so he can further the development of the machine so devastating as disbelief in things of the spirit? When the infidel mocks him as a superstitious invention the devil is doubtless quite content to bear the insult and bide his time.

¹⁷ loc. cit. a. 3.