

Seeking God in All Things

It is a mark of the evil spirit to assume the appearance of an angel of light. He begins by suggesting thoughts that are suited to a devout soul, and ends by suggesting his own. . . . Again, it may end in what weakens the soul, or disquiets it; or by destroying the peace, tranquility, and quiet which it had before, it may cause disturbance to the soul. These things are a clear sign that the thoughts are proceeding from the evil spirit, the enemy of our progress and eternal salvation.

-St. Ignatius of Loyola, Sp.Ex. 332-333-

Though I have tried to hide it, I must confess: I have been pretty grumpy, these last few weeks. And I realize now, this feeling is more than the weather, or the news, or too much work, or the end of the school year, or even my body's increasing decrepitude. No. What is at work here may involve all of those things, but it is something deeper, something in my soul: the subtle whisperings of that dark spirit I have known for much of my life.

For many of us, I know, the mention of "*the dark spirit*" conjures up images of Satan in his red tights with his pointy tail, horns and pitchfork at the ready. Such an idea of a personal force of evil may seem a laughable anachronism, part of the medieval superstition, which we are far too sophisticated to believe. And yet . . . even if one denies the notion of a personal tempter (which, based on my own experience, I do not), or if one sees Satan as mere allegory, it is hard to deny the psychological experience of temptation and the subsequent experience of desolation. It is hard to deny how often we seem to move in directions we do not desire, or fail to move in directions that we wish we would. Whether it is a psychological phenomenon or a personal presence, the dark spirit moves in us and seems to be, as Ignatius calls it, "*the enemy of our human nature.*"

When I was a young man, I recall the temptations that used to assault me: temptations to avarice or anger, to lying or cheating, to lust or drunkenness, to pride or cruelty. Indeed, while sloth never seemed attractive to me, the other deadly sins seemed to take turns assaulting my conscience, leading me in ways I did not wish to go. More than a few times I found myself, despondent and disheartened, in line for the confessional, wondering why I kept doing these things that made me feel so bad, and praying the words of the tax collector in the parable: "*Oh Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.*" In those days, the dark spirit came to me in ways that were loud and obvious, like water splashing on a stone (to use one of St. Ignatius' images). And though I did not always have the moral strength or courage to avoid these temptations, the darkness they carried seemed obvious to me, and the guilt and shame that followed my sinning was grace enough to lead me to repentance (if not always enough to prevent me from falling again).

These days, however, after 34 years in the Jesuits, when age and (I hope) wisdom make the old temptations less attractive, I have found myself pursued by a quieter darkness, a more subtle and pernicious spirit. Grounded not in my lusts or passions, this dark spirit works upon my sense of virtue and my deep desire for good. It comes to me through my disgust at the injustice of the world—e.g., the displacement of refugees, the viciousness of war, the killing of the innocent, the abuse of women and enslavement of children—and through my righteous anger at those who perpetrate such evil—e.g., the venal and egoistic

political leaders, who lie and dissemble for their own prurient or prideful ends; or the Church officials, who sit by silently when their words are needed, or who speak only to reiterate rules that alienate women and men from the table of Christ. In these moments, though my disgust and anger may be, as Ignatius says, "*suited to a devout soul*," there is also, because of my own failure to discern well, a foothold for the dark spirit, a temptation to which I find myself terribly vulnerable. Filled with anger and sorrow—feelings exacerbated by the isolating power of mass media and the dreary darkness of the Seattle winter—I have become, at times, disengaged from the fullness of the world, caught in cycles of rage and despair, in the kind of abstraction that always leads us away from God and deeper into the barren wilderness of ego.

In an era such as ours, when resistance to so many genuine evils summons us to social action and revolutionary zeal, the dark spirit can insinuate itself even in those women and men far advanced in the spiritual life—not by drawing them into the noisier "*sins of the flesh*" but rather by withdrawing them from the enfleshed reality of those who surround them. Like the so-called "*Judaizers*" in *Acts of the Apostles*, who sought to force converts into the righteousness of the Old Covenant, we can become so concerned with the morality of our arguments, with the purity of our principles, that we can fail to see the people whom our principles might effect, fail to recognize the brothers and sisters who—even when they are in error—continue to be worthy of our respect and our love. Whether we embrace the ideologies of Pro-Life or Pro-Choice, the Moral Majority or the ACLU, the Trump resistance or the Trump vanguard, whenever we allow our goodness to become separated from real persons, to become an abstraction, to become an ideology—i.e., whenever we sacrifice the human to the ideal—we embrace a spirit of darkness disguised as a spirit of light, and we are in danger of losing our connection to the Incarnate Christ, who alone offers us hope and resurrection.

Nor is such abstract moral purity limited to the great issues of the day; rather, like any sin, it seeps into our day-to-day existence, staining all our encounters with the ugliness of judgment and stereotyping. Filled with self-righteousness, we mumble to ourselves or yell out at the universe: "*Why are these millennials so lazy?*" "*Why don't these old people learn how to drive?*" "*Why am I the only one at work who does the hard stuff?*" "*When will these boomers stop talking about themselves?*" And, as we judge and condemn others, we also begin to do the same to ourselves, as the dark spirit causes us to see only our failure and our inability to live the perfection against which we measure ourselves. Thus, rage is wed to despair, and the "*enemy of our progress*" seems to gain the field.

Yet, if the mess of this world—both the great world and our own internal neighborhood—offers an opportunity for the dark spirit to thrive, there is a grace at the heart of this world greater than the mess, a light given to all of us in Creation and renewed in each one of us by the redemptive act of Christ's Incarnation. In Jesus, we are reminded that true virtue is never found in ideology and abstraction, but in the complex reality of our human nature: in relationships of compassion and tenderness, of mercy and healing, of respectful disagreement built on human engagement. The "*enemy of our human nature*" wants us to forget that we are more than ideals and abstractions, that our nature desires—first of all—relationship with God and with our sisters and brothers. To live in the illusion of ideology and self-righteous judgment is not the way to the kingdom of God, but the way to the

kingdom of suffering and torture, where others become means by which my ideas are realized, and not persons—equal in honor and dignity to myself, and without whom my honor and dignity mean nothing.

This does not mean that we should ignore tyranny and evil; quite the contrary. As Pope Francis notes, we must become active members in a “*revolution of tenderness.*” But, to do so, we must free ourselves from the dark spirit of grumpiness and ideology, of abstract goodness and moral outrage—all the ways in which we reduce our brothers and sisters to objects of judgment, and reduce ourselves to isolated guardians of virtue, doomed to hold this imperfect world in the prison that our thoughts have created. If we want to find freedom and virtue, happiness and love, we must leave behind our abstract ideals and embrace the real women and men who need us and welcome us. We must go to the poor and lonely, to children and the elderly, to all the particular women and men whose lives are made better for our being with them, and who make our lives better by showing us the face of the living God. We must be tender to ourselves—letting go of our pride and finding times for rest and laughter, trusting that God who loved the universe before we existed, will keep loving it even if we sneak in a little nap. We must, in all this, defy the dark spirit by embracing the light given to us, where creation and redemption, conversion and cooperation are manifested in a God made flesh, a God who loves us, and whom we are called to seek in the fullness of this challenging and beautiful world.