

POPE ONCE RAILED AGAINST DISBELIEF IN THE DEVIL AND SAW A RETURN OF 'DARK POWERS'

At a time when the devil is barely mentioned from the pulpit and the concept of evil considered to be abstract, Pope Benedict XVI's beliefs, as expressed when he was a cardinal, are clear: the devil is not only real but something that we ignore at our own peril. Moreover, the man who would become Pope once expressed the pressing need for all Christians to act as "exorcists" as he cited a return of "dark powers."

That was not to say that laymen should cast out demons in the formal Catholic rite but rather that all must recognize the operations of evil and overcome it with the proper fear not of evil, said the future Pope, but of God.

"Whatever the less discerning theologians may say, the devil, as far as Christian belief is concerned, is a puzzling but real, personal and not merely symbolical presence," Benedict XVI said in The Ratzinger Report [co-authored with Vittorio Messori, above left]. "He is a powerful reality (the 'prince of this world,' as he is called by the New Testament, which continually reminds us of his existence), a baneful superhuman freedom directed against God's freedom. This is evident if we look realistically at history, with its abyss of ever-new atrocities which cannot be explained by reference to man alone. On his own, man has not the power to oppose Satan, but the devil is not second to God, and united with Jesus we can be certain of vanquishing him. Christ is 'God Who is near to us,' willing and able to liberate us: that is why the Gospel really is 'Good News.' And that is why we must go on proclaiming Christ in those realms of fear and unfreedom."

Such may come as a jolt to those who view Joseph Ratzinger more as a hard-nosed intellectual and to certain theologians, priests, and bishops who have all but discounted existence of an actual nefarious preternatural spirit -- either arguing that the very mention of the devil is counterproductive ("negative") or dismissing the idea to begin with.

But the devil does not simply stand for "sin"; he is not a mere symbol or image; an approach of denial is one authored by Satan himself, said Benedict XVI. He described sociologists and philosophers who have dismissed notions of the devil as possessing a philosophy that "consists merely in banal, uncritical assent to the convictions of the present time."

One of then-Cardinal Ratzinger's most celebrated books, *Dogma und Verkündigung*, treats the topic of the devil as one of the "major themes of preaching."

Raised in Nazi Germany, the Pope, like John Paul II before him, had only too close a look at how evil can manifest and fretted in the 1985 book that "there are already signs of the return of these dark powers, and Satanic cults are spreading more and more in the secularized world."

Yet in the current day homilies mentioning Satan are rare and numerous dioceses do not so much as boast an exorcist.

Will that change under Benedict -- the very name associated with spiritual warfare?

"Anyone who has a clear picture of the dark sides of the age in which we live sees forces at work which aim to disintegrate the relationships among men," said the Pope. "In this situation the Christian can see that his task as exorcist must regain the importance it had when the faith was at the beginning. Of course the word 'exorcism' must not be understood here in its technical sense; it simply refers to the attitude of faith as a whole, which 'overcomes the world' and 'casts out' the prince of this world. Once the Christian has begun to be aware of this dark abyss, he knows that he owes the world this service."

Ratzinger and Messori pointed out that in addition to the affirmations of the New Testament -- which treats the devil not as a symbol, but as an actual presence -- Vatican II documents speak 17 times of "satan," "the devil," the "evil one," "the ancient serpent," the "power of darkness," and the "prince of this world." "At least five of these references occur in *Daudium et spes* -- the most 'optimistic' document of the entire Council," noted Messori in an interlocution between answers he posed to the cardinal.

The Pope equated belief in the devil with spiritual maturity. Genuine courage, he said, does not close its eyes to the dimensions of danger but considers danger realistically.

In unity with Jesus, and with fear of God, the devil is easily defeated. But, in a balanced way, he said, there has to be that recognition.

"The more one understands the holiness of God, the more one understands the opposite of what is holy, namely, the deceptive masks of the devil," said the future Pope. "Jesus Christ Himself is the greatest example of this: before Him, the Holy One, Satan could not keep hidden and was constantly compelled to show himself. So one might say that the disappearance of the awareness of the demonic indicates a related decline in holiness. The devil can take refuge in his favorite element, anonymity, if he is not exposed by the radiance of the person united to Christ."

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