

Casting Out Demons
4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 1:21-28)

As he begins his new teaching with new authority, Jesus also performs the first exorcism of his public ministry, in the Synagogue at Capernaum. Exorcism, or the casting out of demons, continues to be a fundamental work of the Church, which possesses the voice and authority of Christ.

There is a tendency to explain away demonic activity by reducing it to psychological or mental issues, but this is a mistake. Even when there may be psychological issues involved in a person's struggle, there is always a spiritual aspect to the struggle mixed in. Demons seek out and take advantage of man's weaknesses and vulnerabilities, including those that affect his mental and emotional life. For instance, an addiction is always on some level a spiritual problem, a bondage to sinful or destructive behavior that is healed only through faith, forgiveness, and redemption, i.e., exorcism of the demonic exploitation of one's weakness.

Among the Church's liturgical rites is the formal ritual of exorcism, necessary in certain serious cases where the Church must intervene more formally through the bishop in expelling demons who have taken possession of a child of God. But apart from the these situations which are more exceptional, exorcism is a regular and ordinary part of the Church's daily work.

Demons exist, and Christian life is a constant spiritual warfare. A battle for dominion is underway, as the Church in Christ's name, claims mankind back from darkness for God. Every Christian becomes a foot soldier in this battle against "*principalities and powers and world rulers of the present darkness*" (Eph 6:12).

We should be aware of the means to fight this battle which are given to us by God, which St. Paul calls the "*armor of God*" (Eph 6:10-20). Above all, when experiencing demonic attacks or the power of evil, we resort to prayer. It is impossible to overcome demons by human skill or effort. It is only through God's power and authority, invoked in prayer and supplication, that we achieve victory.

First among the prayers is the one given us by Christ – the Lord's Prayer – which invokes God's holy name, the establishment of His dominion on earth "as it is in heaven," and the formal petition for deliverance from evil, i.e., from the evil one. Another important prayer to use specifically with regard to demons, which we may not think about, is the Creed. St. Paul says faith is our shield (Eph 6:16), it resists and pushes back against demons. If faith is our shield, then Scripture is our sword (Eph 6:17), especially the Psalms. Among the Psalms, number 91 stands out because it was the one used by Jesus himself when attacked by the devil in the

desert (Mt 4:6). The Church gives us the special Prayer of St. Michael the Archangel to invoke the power of God's heavenly hosts against demons (cf. Rv 12). Another beautiful prayer from our tradition is the Breastplate ("Lorica") of St. Patrick, who evangelized Ireland by casting out the snakes.

Besides prayer, we need devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. God has put enmity between her and the evil one (Gn 3:15), which cannot touch her in any way. This protection extends to her children (Rv 12:17), who suffer attack. It is she who will help crush the head of the serpent through her Son. In the spiritual battle against the forces of darkness, we must stay close to her, and invoke her intercession, through the Hail Mary, the Rosary, and devotional consecration.

From the moment the Cross of Christ was rediscovered in 325 A.D., it has also become a powerful tool in the fight against evil, since it is the instrument of the devil's destruction. Wherever the crucifix is displayed, the dominion and authority of Christ is asserted.

To all these methods, we can add blessing with holy water. Holy water, consecrated in a special way by the Cross of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, has an efficacious cleansing power with regard to evil. And this is because it derives from one of the Sacraments, which are the most important means of expelling evil.

Holy Water derives its power from the sacrament of baptism. Blessings with Holy Water invoke and renew the grace of Baptism, which washed away sin, and restored new life. Holy Water echoes both the waters of the Red Sea which drowned the (demonic) army of Pharaoh, and the River of Life which flows from Christ's side into the desert of all the world, bringing spiritual fruits and medicines (Ez 47:7-12). Baptism, which begins with an exorcism, a spiritual breastplate anointing, and a renunciation of the kingdom of darkness, washes away sin completely and is the first way the Church casts out demons and destroys their power.

Confirmation continues this work in a powerful way, by imprinting into the soul indelibly, through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the "Seal of God" which is the image of Christ. Confirmation gives the Christian God's name and God's authority, which is the authority of His Son. Unless a Christian compromises or corrupts that character and stature of Christ in him, his soul has become a formidable fortress against demonic attack (cf. Rv 9:1-4).

In the Sacrament of Confession (Penance), it is not only sins which are absolved, but the demons which are banished. All their work and effort, and all darkness, is instantaneously overcome, in the way that flipping a light switch instantaneously fills a dark room with light.

Finally, the sacrament of the Eucharist banishes demons, who cannot endure the Real Presence of the Lord. Medieval churches often have grotesque gargoyles adorning the outside of the building, as if they are flying outward from its walls. It is symbolic of the repulsion experienced by the demons to what lies within that church. By the very fact a church exists and the Mass is offered in a community, the power of Christ exists there to establish God's Kingdom and dominion. The power of the Eucharist is also illustrated in Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, where Christ himself through his Eucharistic presence blesses not only those present, but the entire community in all directions.

Exorcism, then, is a basic part of the Church's work, and is accomplished effectively through the ordinary sacramental, devotional, and prayer life of Christians. Though we may not even realize it, by humbly and sincerely fulfilling our ordinary duties, we accomplish a mighty work of God, exercising power and authority over the forces of evil.

As long as we remain faithful to these duties, we are safe. It is difficult if not impossible for demons to achieve their ends, even as the battle intensifies and they multiply their efforts in assaulting "*the rest of the Woman's offspring, those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus*" (Rv 12:17).

In order to stay safe, and give the demons little chance of invading our inner sanctuary, there are several precautions we need to observe. The first is staying active in the practice of our faith, especially the sacramental life. As long as we are with the Church, we are with Mary and Christ, and safe from spiritual harm. When we begin to fall away, we begin to expose ourselves to harm. "There is safety in numbers," safety "*where two or three are gathered together in my name*" (Mt 18:20).

Another danger is superstition. Superstition is a lack of faith in the true God, a spiritual fear that leads us to trust other things such as luck or fortune, or believe simplistically that certain prayers and rituals will bring us what we desire. Superstition is a false or counterfeit faith, and because it can "look like" true devotion it is very dangerous, and utilized by demons. Superstition includes such things as good luck charms, horoscopes, but even saying legitimate prayers or devotions in a way disrespectful of God's Providence and absolute sovereignty.

More dangerous than superstition is actual participation in the occult, which are rituals intentionally undertaken that seek or appeal to spiritual powers. Witchcraft/wicca, curanderos, séances, even "games" such as Ouija boards are open invitations to the unclean spirits to enter our lives.

If there is ever doubt regarding the legitimacy of some practice, prayer, or ritual, we simply need to ask ourselves if it is something recommended and approved by the Church and her priests, or not.

Along these lines, and in conclusion, the importance of *authority* needs to be stressed. Christ taught and commanded spirits with authority. It is by the Spirit and authority of God that demons are cast out (Mt 12:28). This authority of God is given to our lives for the purpose of keeping us safe. God's authority is revealed in the commandments, and exercised through fatherhood. Parents exercise God's authority in the lives of their children, who are vulnerable to all kinds of danger without it. Likewise, the fathers of the Church exercise God's authority in the lives of her children, who are vulnerable to demons without it. It is a fundamental strategy of the evil one to drive a wedge between youth and parents, between the sheep and their Shepherd. It was the strategy employed in the garden of Eden, and it continues to be successful. *Disobedience* is the greatest of dangers, because of the way it removes one from God's help, and exposes one to the control and manipulation of the devils, who are shrewd and intelligent. The law is given to us for our protection. God's authority over us keeps us safe.

As we learn to be Christ's disciples, let us understand the nature of the battle we face, make good use of the spiritual weapons he has given us, and fight successfully for the Kingdom of God.