

## SATAN: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Statue of the Archangel Saint Michael fighting the dragon (us.fotolia.com/kmiragaya)

*“What is the difference between Christ and Satan? It is quite simple. Christ descended into hell; Satan fell into it.”* — G.K. Chesterton

In Pope Francis’ first homily, given on March 14th, the day after his election to the Chair of Peter, he made a comment that went mostly unnoticed, perhaps because of the great excitement and even

surprise following his selection by the College of Cardinals. Quoting the French novelist and poet, Léon Bloy(1846-1917), Francis said, “When one does not profess Jesus Christ—I recall the phrase of Leon Bloy—‘Whoever does not pray to God, prays to the devil.’ When one does not profess Jesus Christ, one professes the worldliness of the devil.” The next day, addressing the Cardinals, he said, “Let us never give in to pessimism, to that bitterness that the devil tempts us with every day.” A few days later, on March 24th, in one of his first papal tweets, Francis wrote: “We must not believe the Evil One when he tells us that there is nothing we can do in the face of violence, injustice and sin.” As has become readily evident (see sidebar, “Recent Popes and the Devil”), Pope Francis has a strong conviction about the reality of Satan, the Evil One.

### **The Devil is in the numbers**

We, of course, expect the pope—whether Francis or any of his 265 predecessors—to believe in the existence of the devil. After all, isn’t belief in the existence of Satan as much a part of basic Christian belief as belief in God, Jesus Christ, and the Resurrection? But various polls from the past twenty years indicate that Americans in general and Catholics specifically often employ a “pick and choose” approach to basic beliefs. For example, twenty years ago, in December of 1993, *Time* magazine featured a story and an opinion poll on angels. The poll revealed that 69% of respondents believed in the existence of angels, but only 49% believed in the existence of fallen “angels or devils.” Two years later, in 1995, a Barna survey found that 58% of American adults believed Satan is “not a living being but is a symbol of evil.”

An October 2002 study by the Barna Group revealed that 59% of Americans reject the existence of Satan, with many respondents saying they believe the devil is merely a symbol of evil. The study stated: “Catholics are much more likely than Protestants to hold this view — 75% compared to 55% — although a majority of both groups concur that Satan is symbolic.” The study also noted that the rejection of Satan’s existence apparently conflicted with the fact that 54% of respondents believed that “a human being can be under the control or the influence of spiritual forces such as demons.” The religious group with the highest percentage (59%) of members who believe that Satan is a living entity was Mormon. The group with the lowest percentage, at 17%, was Catholic.

In November 2008, Harris Poll conducted a nationwide survey of 2,126 U.S. adults and found the following: “80% of adult Americans believe in God – unchanged since the last time we asked the question in 2005. Large majorities of the public believe in miracles (75%), heaven (73%), angels (71%), that Jesus is God or the Son of God (71%), the resurrection of Jesus (70%), the survival of the soul after death (68%), hell (62%), the Virgin birth (Jesus born of Mary (61%) and the devil (59%).”

As for Catholics, the same poll found that while 93% expressed belief in God and 91% said they believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ, a notably lower percentage believed in the existence of hell (78%) and of “the devil” (74%). What is not clear from the poll, especially in light of other surveys, is how many of the respondents might believe the devil is a metaphor or symbol for evil. Recent history, especially in Western societies, indicates that the step from denying that Satan is an actual creature to denying his existence in any form can be a short, quick one.

And perhaps that is how Satan would prefer it, if it is true that “the Devil’s cleverest wile is to convince us that he does not exist,” as the poet Charles Baudelaire is credited with saying. Archbishop Fulton

Sheen, in his *Life of Christ* (1958), developed that insight further, writing, “Very few people believe in the devil these days, which suits the devil very well. He is always helping to circulate the news of his own death. The essence of God is existence, and He defines Himself as: ‘I am Who am.’ The essence of the devil is the lie, and he defines himself as: ‘I am who am not.’ Satan has very little trouble with those who do not believe in him; they are already on his side.”

### **Church teaching about Satan**

While it is undoubtedly the case that many Catholics, including even some priests and catechists, prefer to remain quiet about the subject of Satan, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is not silent on the matter. “Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents,” it states in the section on The Fall, “lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy. Scripture and the Church’s Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called ‘Satan’ or the ‘devil.’” (par 391). It further notes that the Church “teaches that Satan was at first a good angel, made by God,” and then quotes from the Fourth Lateran Council, which convened in 1215: “The devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing.”

Satan, the *Catechism* teaches, is a creature of pure spirit who possesses significant power, yet he is not infinite. “He is only a creature, powerful from the fact that he is pure spirit, but still a creature. He cannot prevent the building up of God’s reign.” He does act in the world out of his hatred for God and the kingdom established by Jesus Christ, and in doing so, he “may cause grave injuries—of a spiritual nature and, indirectly, even of a physical nature—to each man and to society...” Yet these destructive acts, as mysterious as they are, can only occur because they are “permitted by divine providence which with strength and gentleness guides human and cosmic history” (par 395).

The essential feature of the devil’s rebellious activity is pride, which ultimately manifests in seeking to be “godlike” but without acknowledging, knowing, or loving God: “Constituted in a state of holiness, man was destined to be fully ‘divinized’ by God in glory. Seduced by the devil, he wanted to ‘be like God,’ but ‘without God, before God, and not in accordance with God.’” (par 398; see par 414). This echoes what the fathers of the Second Vatican Council expressed in *Gaudium et spes*: “Although he was made by God in a state of holiness, from the very onset of his history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One. Man set himself against God and sought to attain his goal apart from God” (par 13).

Also notable is the *Catechism*’s explanation that the petition “Deliver us from evil” in the “Our Father” does not refer to evil as “an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God. The devil (*dia-bolos*) is the one who ‘throws himself across’ God’s plan and his work of salvation accomplished in Christ” (par 2851). Which means that even those who might deny the personal, creaturely nature of Satan unwittingly acknowledge it whenever they recite the “Our Father.”

### **Satan in Sacred Scripture**

At the start of Scripture and in its conclusion, the devil is depicted as a serpent. He was “the most cunning of all the animals that the LORD God had made...” (Gen 3:1) and he is “the dragon, the ancient serpent, which is the Devil or Satan...” (Rev 20:2). But the Old Testament’s presentation of Satan is complicated and even ambiguous in at times. The Hebrew word *satan* does not appear often

in the Old Testament, and when it does, it usually refers to an action—obstructing, opposing, accusing—rather than a specific entity. It is sometimes used to describe the work of both human and heavenly beings sent to stop, or oppose, the actions of a wrongdoer and to act as an agent of judgment on behalf of God.

1 Chronicles recounts that “Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to number Israel” (21:1). But it is in the famous story of Job that the name is used of a specific figure, “the satan,” whose role was to investigate and test the works and character of men. Asked by God, “Whence do you come?”, Satan replied, “From roaming the earth and patrolling it” (Job 2:2). The subsequent testing of Job is done within clear parameters established by God, and so Satan is presented as a sort of divine agent who is not clearly in overt opposition to God. The book of Zechariah presents Satan as the one accusing Joshua the high priest, which earns him a divine rebuke: “May the LORD rebuke you, Satan; may the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you!” (Zech 3:1-2).

By the time of Christ, however, the word “Satan” was a proper name used for a creature of heavenly origin who now stood in open opposition to God and who seeks to undermine creation and destroy mankind. In Jewish apocryphal writings he was described as the prince of evil spirits whose expulsion from heaven was due to his refusal to recognize man as the image of God (cf. Gen 1:26-27).

The various names and descriptions used for Satan in the New Testament are many and varied. He is called Beelzebul (Mk 3:22; Mt 10:25; 12:24), Belial/Beliar (2 Cor 6:15), the evil one (Matt 13:19; Jn 17:15; 1 Jn 5:18, 19), the enemy (Matt 13:25, 28, 29; Lk 10:19), the ruler of the demons (Mk 3:22), the ruler of this world (Jn 12:31; 14:30), the great dragon (Rev 12:9), the serpent, or serpent of old (2 Cor 11:3; Rev 12:9, 14, 14; 20:2), and the tempter (Matt 4:3; 1 Thess 3:5). And, of course, he is called “the Devil” (Matt 4:1; 25:41; Lk 4:2; Jn 13:2; Acts 10:38), which derives from the Greek word *diabolos* (Latin, *diabolus*), which means “slanderer” or “accuser.”

Satan was an angel, a being of pure spirit, created by for God’s glory and work. Possessing free will, he and other angels chose to rebel against their Maker, and were cast from heaven. Quoting St. John Damascene, the *Catechism* explains that this sinful rebellion is unforgivable, having a permanent and irrevocable character (par 393). That cosmic disruption is noted in 2 Peter, which mentions the angels who had sinned (v. 4; cf. Mt 25:41; Job 4:18), as well as in John’s first epistle, which states that “the devil has sinned from the beginning” (1 Jn 3:8). There is also a cryptic passage in Isaiah, which describes the fall from heaven of Lucifer, the “morning star, son of the dawn” (“lucifer” deriving from the Latin for “light-bringing”).

But the longest and most dramatic depiction of the rebellion in heaven is found in the final book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation:

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. (Rev 12:7-9)

As noted, the references in The Apocalypse to the dragon are connected to “the serpent” in Genesis 3 and the story of The Fall. In the ancient Near East, the serpent was often viewed as a cosmic figure

identified with a monster of chaos representing the powers of evil and darkness. In later Jewish thought, in the centuries immediately prior to the time of Christ, the serpent of Genesis 3 became identified with Satan, either as a symbol of Satan or as his mouthpiece (cf. Wis 2:24).

In Revelation 12, the dragon is directly identified as “the ancient serpent”, the Devil and Satan. Jesus described the devil as being “a murderer from the beginning” and “a liar, and the father of lies” (Jn 8:44) and the Apostle Paul wrote about the serpent who “deceived Eve by his cunning” (2 Cor 11:3).

It is Jesus who most often refers to Satan in the New Testament. He identified Satan as the “ruler of this world” (Jn 12:31), a murderer, a liar, and the father of lies (Jn 8:44). He also preached that a central aspect of the salvation He offered involved the destruction of Satan’s power in the world: “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” He said this to show by what death he was to die” (Jn 12:31-33; cf. Jn 16:11; 1 Jn 3:8).

The conflict between Jesus and the ruler of this world is evident throughout the Gospels, even if implicitly. For instance, Jesus often cured people suffering from demonic possession (Mt 9:33; 17:18; Mk 7:26-30; Lk 4:33-35; Lk 9:38-42), demonstrating His power over evil and the “prince of demons” (Matt 9:34; 12:24; cf. Eph 2:2). There were several important moments in Jesus’ ministry when He either spoke of Satan or to Satan. The best-known instance was Satan’s temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Mt 4:1-11; Mk 1:12-13; Lk 4:1-13; CCC 540), an encounter that inaugurated Jesus’ public ministry. The three temptations echo the temptations that both Adam, in the Garden, and the people of Israel, in the desert, underwent. But while they had failed to resist the work of Satan, Jesus was victorious over the tempter (CCC 538-540).

Jesus knew that just as He had been tempted and confronted by the devil, His disciples and Church would also come under severe attack from Satan and his angels. He told Peter that the powers of hell would seek to destroy the Church but would not prevail (Mt 16:18). He also told him, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat” (Lk 22:31), indicating some of the hardships the apostles would have to endure. Although St. Peter denied Jesus, he repented of his sin; Judas, on the other hand, was seduced by Satan and betrayed Jesus (Jn 13:2, 27).

St. Paul mentioned Satan in several of his epistles, often in the context of temptation (1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 2:11) and spiritual conflict (Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 12:7; Eph 4:27; 6:11; 1 Thess 2:18). He distinguished between Satan’s ability to tempt and man’s free will to reject or succumb to the temptation; he did not confuse Satan and sin. Satan tempts us to sin, but he cannot make us sin; we choose to either sin or not. “Submit yourselves therefore to God,” wrote St. James in his epistle, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Jms 4:7). Vivid descriptions of Satan include “angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14), a “roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8), and “the great red dragon” with seven heads and ten horns (Rev 12:3-17).

What will happen to Satan at the conclusion of temporal history? Just before His arrest, Jesus told his disciples that the devil and his angels are destined for “eternal fire” that has been prepared for them (Mt 25:41). And at the end of time, after being allowed to test the faithful for a time (Rev 20:7), Satan will be “thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev 20:10; cf. CCC 677).

## Recent Popes and the Devil

In a general audience titled “Confronting the Devil’s power,” (November 15, 1972) Pope Paul VI reiterated three important truths about Satan, stating that it is a departure from “biblical Church teaching to refuse to acknowledge the Devil’s existence; to regard him as a self-sustaining principle who, unlike other creatures, does not owe his origin to God; or to explain the Devil as a pseudo-reality, a conceptual, fanciful personification of the unknown causes of our misfortunes.” In other words, the Devil exists, he is a creature who was created by God, and he is real and active in the world today.

Over the course of his lengthy pontificate, Blessed John Paul II spoke about Satan in many contexts. In a general audience given on August 13, 1986, he provided a catechesis on the fall of Satan and the angels and described the devil as a “cosmic liar and murderer.” He said, “According to Sacred Scripture, and especially the New Testament, the dominion and the influence of Satan and of the other evil spirits embraces all the world. ... The action of Satan consists primarily in tempting men to evil, by influencing their imaginations and higher faculties, to turn them away from the law of God.” He spoke of the possibility of demonic possession, saying, “It is not always easy to discern the preternatural factor operative in these cases, and the Church does not lightly support the tendency to attribute many things to the direct action of the devil; but in principle it cannot be denied that Satan can go to this extreme manifestation of his superiority, in his will to harm and lead to evil.”

Benedict XVI often focused on how the death of Christ, which reveals the perfect love of God, destroyed the power of Satan. In a December 2006 tribute to the Statue of the Immaculate Conception, he exhorted, “Give us the courage to say ‘no’ to the deceptions of power, money, pleasure; to dishonest earnings, corruption and hypocrisy, to selfishness and violence; ‘no’ to the Evil One, the deceitful prince of this world; to say ‘yes’ to Christ, who destroys the power of evil with the omnipotence of love. We know that only hearts converted to Love, which is God, can build a better future for all.” In a homily given in Cyprus in June 2010, he spoke of the connection between the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden and the wood of the Cross. “Through God’s providence, the work of the Evil One would be undone by turning his own weapons against him,” he preached. “Beguiled by the serpent, Adam had forsaken his filial trust in God and sinned by biting into the fruit of the one tree in the garden that was forbidden to him. In consequence of that sin, suffering and death came into the world. The tragic effects of sin, suffering and death were all too evident in the history of Adam’s descendants. We see this in our first reading today, with its echoes of the Fall and its prefiguring of Christ’s redemption. ... The innocent Lamb was slain on the altar of the Cross, and yet from the immolation of the victim new life burst forth: the power of evil was destroyed by the power of self-sacrificing love.”

Pope Francis, in just the first few months of his pontificate, made many references to the reality of the Evil One. On July 5th, on the occasion of the inauguration of the new statue of St Michael the Archangel in the Vatican Gardens, he uttered these striking words, “Michael fights to reestablish divine justice; he defends the People of God from their enemies and above all from the arch-enemy par excellence, the devil. And St Michael triumphs because in him it is God who acts. This sculpture reminds us therefore that evil is vanquished, the accuser is unmasked, his head is crushed, because salvation was fulfilled once and for all by the blood of Christ. Even if the devil is always trying to scratch the face of the Archangel and the face of man, God is stronger; his is the victory and his salvation is offered to every human being.”

In his homily on the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Francis reflected on the depiction in The Apocalypse (chapter 12) of the “woman clothed in the sun” and the “huge red dragon” who seeks to destroy her. The woman, he explained, represents both the Church and Mary; the Church “continually lives through the trials and challenges which the conflict between God and the evil one, the perennial enemy, brings. And in the struggle which the disciples must confront – all of us, all the disciples of Jesus, we must face this struggle – Mary does not leave them alone: the Mother of Christ and of the Church is always with us. ... Well, prayer with Mary, especially the Rosary, has this “suffering” dimension, that is of struggle, a sustaining prayer in the battle against the evil one and his accomplices. The Rosary also sustains us in the battle.”

In a September 15th Angelus address, Francis said if we living according to the law “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” “we will never escape from the spiral of evil. The evil one is clever, and deludes us into thinking that with our human justice we can save ourselves and save the world! In reality, only the justice of God can save us! And the justice of God is revealed in the Cross: the Cross is the judgement of God on us all and on this world. But how does God judge us? By giving his life for us! Here is the supreme act of justice that defeated the prince of this world once and for all; and this supreme act of justice is the supreme act of mercy.”

One of the more revealing statements by Francis about the devil was made prior to his election, in 2010, in a dialogue with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, published as *On Heaven and Earth* (Image, 2013). The devil’s “fruits are always destructive: division, hate, and slander,” said then-Cardinal Bergoglio. “And in my personal experience, I feel him every time that I am tempted to do something that is not what God wants for me. I believe that the Devil exists.” While there are undoubtedly many reasons for this belief, including his Jesuit roots and his great affection for St. Augustine, his mystical encounter with Christ as a teenager seems to have impressed deeply upon him the reality of spiritual warfare—“Man’s life on Earth is warfare”, he told Skorka—and the existence of the devil.

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- BENEDICT XVI
- CHARLES BAUDELAIRE
- DEVIL
- FULTON SHEEN
- JOHN PAUL II
- POPE FRANCIS
- SATAN

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**Carl E. Olson** is editor of Catholic World Report and Ignatius Insight. He is the author of *Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?*, *Will Catholics Be "Left Behind"*, co-editor/contributor to *Called To Be the Children of God*, co-author of *The Da Vinci Hoax* (Ignatius), and author of the "Catholicism" and "Priest Prophet King" Study Guides for Word on Fire. He is also a contributor to "Our Sunday Visitor" newspaper, "The Catholic Answer" magazine, "The Catholic Herald", "National Catholic Register", "Chronicles", and other publications.