

PREFACE

“We are Coming Out of the Desert”

— *St. Anthony of Beaconsfield*

In one sense this present book is a complement to my previous title *The Tumbler of God: Chesterton as Mystic*.¹ In that book I attempted to demonstrate that one of the main sources of G.K. Chesterton’s sense of joy and wonder was a genuine mystical grace that enabled him to experience everything coming forth at every moment from the creative hand of God. For those not very familiar with Chesterton, or who have a rather superficial knowledge of his writings, they could have the impression that he didn’t see any evil in the world. However, to correct such a notion, I want to emphasize in this book his belief in, and pugnacious battle with, *the devil*. Of course, he also believed in the evil present in the human heart, and in the “problem of evil” which philosophers try to explain. These last two have been treated in Mark Knight’s *Chesterton and Evil*,² and we will be considering some of his insights below. My emphasis is explicitly on Satan.

In my research for this book I have often found that treatment of the devil in major works about Chesterton often lacking. For

¹ In Canada, *The Tumbler of God* (Justin Press: Ottawa, Ontario, 2012). Outside Canada (Angelico Press: Brooklyn, New York, 2013).

² Mark Knight, *Chesterton and Evil* (Fordham University Press: New York, 2004).

example, we have all profited very much from Aidan Nichols' *G.K. Chesterton, Theologian*;³ and an increasing number of people will delight in Ian Ker's recent biography, *G.K. Chesterton*.⁴ The following is not a criticism but a comment: there is no treatment at all in these books about the devil. One cannot cover all the bases in one book, but such omissions encouraged me to pursue the study of this topic. At the end of *Chesterton and Evil*, a book that you would think might have some treatment of the devil, Mark Knight, the author, says: "The response to evil that Chesterton constructs is multifaceted and comprehensive."⁵ In my reading I have found that often the existence and influence of the devil is one of the "facets" omitted. Knight himself hardly treats the devil at all.

A very important and timely exception to the absence, or minimal mention, of Satan in the above-cited books occurs in Dale Ahlquist's excellent *The Complete Thinker: The Marvelous Mind of G.K. Chesterton*. In his Fourth Chapter "The Problem of Evil," Ahlquist's quote from Chesterton will be an excellent introduction to my theme. Speaking of the common man, Chesterton wrote:

Something tells him that the ultimate idea of a world is not bad or even neutral; staring at the sky or the grass or the truths of mathematics or even a new-laid egg, he has a vague feeling like a shadow of that saying of the great Christian philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas, 'Every existence, as such, is good.' On the other hand, something else tells him that it is unmanly and debased and even diseased to minimise evil to a dot or even a blot. He

³ Aidan Nichols, O.P. *G.K. Chesterton, Theologian* (Darton, Longman and Todd: London, 2009).

⁴ Ian Ker, *G.K. Chesterton, A Biography* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011).

⁵ Knight, pp. 149-50.

realises that optimism is morbid. It is, if possible, even more morbid than pessimism. These vague but healthy feelings, if he followed them out, would result in the idea that *evil is in some way an exception but an enormous exception; and ultimately that evil is an invasion or yet more truly a rebellion*. He does not think that everything is right or that everything is wrong, or that everything is equally right and wrong. But he does think that right has a right to be right and therefore a right to be there; and wrong has no right to be wrong and therefore no right to be there. It is the prince of the world; but it is also a usurper.⁶

Ahlquist comments: “Evil is an invasion. It is a rebellion. G.K. Chesterton says that he believed in the existence of the devil before he believed in God.”⁷ He then goes on to discuss the famous incident of “the diabolist” which I will also consider below.

Most of Chapter Four of Chesterton’s *Autobiography* concerns his early encounter with evil and the dark side of the supernatural world.⁸ His belief in the devil, and in the reality of evil in the human heart, were essential catalysts, both in clarifying who and what the enemy was, and in giving the battle the clang of reality and purpose. The poem by Walter de la Mare, cited at the beginning, is a significant confirmation of how some of his close friends understood that his battle was very much concerned with *Satan*, and that this was an essential aspect of his thinking and writings.

⁶ *The Everlasting Man*, quoted by Dale Ahlquist, *The Complete Thinker* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2012), pp. 57-58.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁸ Although he said in 1906 (*Daily News*, Aug. 11) that “I believe in the supernatural as a matter of intellect and reason, not as a matter of personal experience,” I don’t believe this was true! The thesis of my book, *The Tumbler of God*, seeks to demonstrate that he received a mystical grace, which is an experience; and we shall see that his dabbling with the Ouija board was surely an experience of the dark side of the supernatural.

The theme running through this present book, and the inspiration that fueled it, is my belief that Chesterton is a new desert father, like St. Anthony the Great, immortalized by St. Athanasius in his *Life of Anthony*. No doubt my comparison may strike you—if you know anything about St. Anthony—as quite a preposterous and pretentious way of thinking about Chesterton. The reflections offered in this book are an attempt to justify, to some extent, this association of Chesterton with St. Anthony.

I've had the good fortune, during my life, to spend a fair amount of time in solitude, as a Trappist, as a Carthusian, and for many years as a poustinik in the Madonna House community (someone who lives in a little cabin called a poustinia). I mention these biographical details because I came to have a great love and reverence for the desert mothers and fathers who have transmitted to us some of the deepest wisdom the world has ever known. They have given us very profound insights into human nature, the spirit of the gospel, and especially to spiritual combat. They will always be for me one of the wisdom sources for my life with God.

Very simply, over the years, as I read Chesterton, I found in his writings also most profound insights about our relationship with God; and about other areas of life which the desert mothers and fathers never treated. Chesterton never wrote treatises on “the spiritual life.” Actually he abhorred the word “spiritual.” His charisma was to give a faith perspective upon the whole of reality. He doesn't write like a desert father about “the spiritual life,” but the truths he sees with his “eyes of faith” are equally profound, at least they are for me.

Chesterton ends his play “Temptation of St. Anthony” (1925) thus:

Time: You mean the New Religions do not tempt you?

Anthony: I mean I am waiting for them.

Time: Do you mean to suggest as a general criticism that the New Religion....

Anthony: [his voice ringing like a trumpet] *Mine* is The New Religion. We have waited nearly two thousand years and still its name is The New Religion. All this litter of old rags and bones you have swept in front of me is alone enough to prove that the Faith is the last thing of any importance that has happened in the world. I admit we have waited long for something new. I admit in that sense that the creed is something old. But it is newer than calling up ghosts or dancing without clothes, or healing people with spells, or believing in the transmigration of souls, or making up legends about men who lived to be hundreds of years old. It is newer than Egyptian mummies and Asiatic idols and omens and superstitions and dreams.

Go and tell your host [the devil] and your friends and all the cities of the heathens that *we* are coming out of the desert with a New Religion.⁹

After twenty years in the desert Anthony came out to teach others what he had learned. My contention is that Chesterton has emerged from the desert of the modern world—not having fasted as much as Anthony!—to proclaim the “New Religion” of the gospel of Christ in a powerful and ringing way, as did the desert dwellers of the early centuries. As a rather stocky journalist we may not exactly classify his kind of life-style with the asceticism of the desert dwellers. But could we not possibly think of him as a St. Anthony of Beaconsfield for modern times?

⁹ *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. XI (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1989), p. 213.

And isn't it significant that Chesterton puts into the mouth of St. Anthony how he (Chesterton) understands his own apostolate: to proclaim to the modern world, which is being bombarded by all the "new religions," the gospel that has been forgotten? Did he see at least something of the *spirit of Anthony in himself*? Was St. Anthony one of his muses who influenced his own self-understanding?

If most people know anything at all about St. Anthony, they know, especially from the famous painting of Hieronymus Bosch, about the terrible temptations he suffered from the devils. "Satan's strategy was to awaken in Anthony memories of the things he once cherished: the bonds of kinship, such as those with his sister, or the satisfaction of food and life's other pleasures. With only his thoughts for companionship Anthony discovered the truth of the words of Jesus,¹⁰ that the most lethal temptations arise not from without but from within the human breast. 'We have acquired a dark house full of war,' Anthony once said."¹¹ That the war is within our own house will be one of Chesterton's main approaches to "the problem of evil."

Much of Anthony's wisdom flowed from what he learned from these battles. And although we do not have very many famous sayings from Anthony, the testimony of his life was sufficient to make him the father of all the desert dwellers, and the recognized inspiration of this ascetic movement. It has been said that the *Life of St. Anthony* by St. Athanasius was, after the scriptures, the most influential book in the early centuries of Christendom.

Of course, I do not wish to compare Chesterton to St. Anthony; or, rather, yes, *I am going to compare him to St. Anthony*,

¹⁰ Mark 7:20.

¹¹ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (Yale University Press, 2012), p. 101.

but will stop short of saying he is anyone *equal* to St. Anthony! But I *will* make a comparison: Chesterton, in his battle with the demons, emerged from the modern desert with astounding wisdom that have made him one of the greatest intellectual warriors for the gospel in modern times, and perhaps of all time. (And, as we shall see, it is important to fight erroneous ideas because, as Chesterton was fond of noting, they *cause* moral failings.)

Belief in Satan is part of our faith tradition. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents 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.’ The Church teaches that Satan was at first a good angel, made by God: ‘The devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing.’”¹²

Hans Urs von Balthasar writes about the existence of Satan. He first quotes a passage from Teilhard de Chardin, and then comments:

(Teilhard): The quantity and the malice of evil *hic and nunc*, spread through the world, do not betray a certain excess, inexplicable to our reason, if to the *normal effect of evolution* is not added the *extraordinary effect* of some catastrophe or primordial deviation. Von Balthasar comments: Here looms the insoluble question of whether the ‘excess’ of suffering ascertained by the phenomenologist [Teilhard] has not something to do, even at the level of the subhuman world, with the ‘principalities and powers’ of which Paul speaks. Has it not something to do with the ‘god of this world,’ the ‘prince’ and

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition, No. 391.

‘ruler’ of this world, whose original fall from God is responsible for the deep rent that goes from the bottom right up to the top—where it emerges as mankind’s tragic history?¹³

A cardinal once said to St. John Paul II that some bishops don’t believe in the devil. He said, “Then they don’t believe in the gospel.” Chesterton explicitly says—not surprisingly—that “Christ believed in the devils.”¹⁴ As far as the Catholic faith is concerned, it is not an optional belief.

A brief scriptural excursus may be helpful here. One of the petitions of the Our Father is “deliver us from evil.”¹⁵ The word used for “evil” is ambiguous, and thus we have various translations: the RSV: “but deliver us from evil”; the New International Version: “but deliver us from the evil one”; the New Jerusalem Bible: “but save us from the evil one.”

The best commentaries interpret the Lord’s Prayer in an eschatological sense: “‘Lead us not into temptation’ probably does not refer to the daily encounter with evil. The eschatological tone of the prayer suggests that the temptation meant is the great eschatological test, of which Matthew says (24:22) that no one could bear it unless it were abbreviated. ‘Deliver us from evil’: similarly, the eschatological catastrophe is very probably ‘the evil’ from which the Christian prays to be delivered in the final petition.”¹⁶

However, it should be pointed out that it was the almost unanimous opinion of the early Church that it was the *Evil One* who was meant in the Lord’s Prayer. And there are other

¹³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama*, Theological Dramatic Theory IV: the Action (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1994), pp. 197-98.

¹⁴G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2008), p. 195.

¹⁵Matthew 6:13.

¹⁶*The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 73.

passages in the New Testament that use the same word with the unambiguous meaning of the Evil One. For example, 1 John 2:13-14: "I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one...; because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one." The word is also unambiguous in some of the parables: "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart."¹⁷ Thus, besides the accounts of exorcisms, the Evil One is also referred to as a person in the New Testament.

Belief in Satan was certainly part of the theology of the Fathers of the Church.

A quote from the great Origen will be very relevant to my theme.

Origen's *Against Celsus* is the greatest apologetical work of the early centuries. In discussing the problem or origin of evil with Celsus, Origen concludes his argument this way:

No one, moreover, who has not heard what is related of him who is called 'devil, and of his 'angels,' and what he was before he became a devil, and *how* he became such, and what was the cause of the simultaneous apostasy of those who are termed his angels, will be able to ascertain the origin of evils.

But he who would attain to this knowledge must learn more accurately the nature of demons, and know that they are not the work of God so far as respects their demoniacal nature, but only in so far as they are possessed of reason; and also what their origin was, so that they became beings of such a nature, that while converted into demons, the powers of their mind remain. And if there be any topic of human investigation

¹⁷Matthew 13:19.

which is difficult for our nature to grasp, certainly the origin of evils may be considered to be such.¹⁸

Note that Origen acknowledges their ontological goodness: they had a being before they became devils; what they are now is not the work of God; they have reason; their origin is from God; the powers of their minds remain.

This teaching of Origen coincides with what Ralph Wood advised me after reading my manuscript: it's a distinction one should keep in mind throughout the present book. In a personal correspondence he wrote:

I would urge you not to conflate the words 'personal' and 'positive' when treating the problem of evil. You will recall that St. Augustine adapted a strictly negative conception of evil from the neo-Platonists—namely, that evil is *privatio boni*, an absence or loss or lack of good. As such, it has no independence or positive existence but always remains parasitic, deriving its life negatively by living off its host. Yet precisely because evil is literally No-thing, it can assume all manner of states and conditions, including personal and demonic ones. Yet to give it positive status is to fall into the Manichean heresy of dualism, wherein God and the Demonic are set over against each other as contending positive and equal forces. Hence Chesterton's rightful seizure of the term 'nightmare': our experience of it could not be less terrifying, but finally it proves to be false, a chimera, a thing not real but imagined.¹⁹

As Origen taught, even Satan is ontologically good: he shares in existence, and in the powers to know and will. What he thinks

¹⁸Origen, *Contra Celsum*: Roberts, Alexander and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, *Origen Contra Celsum*, Book IV, Chapter LXV.

¹⁹Personal communication to author, July 23, 2012.

and does are parasitic on his basic good qualities.

Belief in Satan has been on the wane in the western world for several centuries—what beliefs haven't been on the wane! On the other hand, there is also a growing awareness, a renewal of faith, in this aspect of the gospel that Jesus confirms for us.

There is now an international organization of exorcists, due mostly to the efforts of the famous Roman exorcist Gabriele Amorth. In Poland there is a new monthly magazine, *Egzorcysta*, dedicated entirely to exorcism. There have been several national conferences in the U.S. on exorcism; and more dioceses around the world once again have an official exorcist. It was the general practice before Vatican II for each diocese to have an exorcist. And when I was ordained it was still one of the minor orders before ordination. Chesterton alludes to this when he says some people only see Christ as an exorcist: "There is another theory [about Christ] that concentrates entirely on the business of diabolism and what it would call the contemporary superstition about demoniacs; as if Christ, like a young deacon taking his first orders, had gotten as far as exorcism, and never got any further."²⁰

Belief in Satan and the existence of satanic cults and rituals is still very much with us. I went to a conference years ago on exorcism. A woman speaker got up and the first words out of her mouth were, "You are looking at the former high priestess of the satanic cult of the Eastern United States!"

John Allen Jr., probably the best Catholic reporter in the English-speaking world, outlines ten present trends in global Catholicism that will certainly be, in his estimation, part of the Church in the 21st century, and beyond. Belief in the devil is not one of his major trends, but it is one of the beliefs of

²⁰ *The Everlasting Man*, p. 197.

worldwide Christianity that will certainly endure. The reasons for this are not only because it is a traditional Christian belief, but even more so because most of Christianity will be south of the equator in Africa, South America and Asia. These are still “spiritual worlds” whose residents believe in spiritual realities such as miracles and the devil. Another major cause is the growth of Pentecostalism, the largest faith movement in the 20th and 21st centuries, whose belief in the devil and exorcism has already had an influence on the “renewal” of this belief in contemporary Catholicism.

Allen opens his book with this projected scene of 2025 where the first Nigerian pope, Victor IV “as he finishes the audience, descends to the first row of pilgrims, where, as he does each Wednesday, performs brief prayers of exorcism for visitors who have reported episodes of demonic possession.”²¹

And this: “It does not tax the imagination to picture a future pope from the global South issuing an encyclical presenting Jesus Christ as the definitive answer to the ‘spirits of this world.’”

Belief in the devil will not go away; interest in Chesterton will not go away. Please God, the relevance of this present book will not go away either as Chesterton can both help to confirm the Church’s belief in this aspect of our faith, as well as give some discernment to global Catholicism on how to recognize the devil’s influence and presence. Chesterton’s pugnacious belief in the devil is another example of his witnessing strongly to one of the truths of the Catholic faith for the Church of our time.

Therefore, the main theme of this book is Chesterton’s battle with evil spirits and with the lies they foster that are contrary to the gospel. Chapter One describes some aspects of Knight’s treatment of evil in Chesterton’s writings that will serve as a

²¹ John Allen, Jr., *The Future Church* (Image: New York, 2009), pp. 13-14.

good background for my treatment of the devil. Chapter Two describes the fighting spirit that pervades all of Chesterton's writings. Chapter Three introduces his early encounters with the devil and the pervasiveness of this theme in his writings. Chapter Four treats his novel *The Ball and the Cross* that concerns his encounter with Professor Lucifer. Chapter Five compares *B&C* with two other apocalyptic novels of the same era—Robert Hugh Benson's *The Lord of the World* and Vladimir Soloviov's *The Story of the Anti-Christ*. Chapter Six reflects on the possible influence of George MacDonald on Chesterton's understanding of evil and the devil.

The word “prophet” is often used of Chesterton. A prophet is not so much someone who “sees” the future but who very deeply knows the present. He or she can see where present trends are heading. They “prophesize” that “if you don't change this course you are on, you are going to wind up in such and such a state.” This was one of Chesterton's chief gifts: he saw deeply into the intellectual errors appearing on the horizon of his day and “predicted” that, if we don't change, this and this will happen. His “prophecies” are being proven right.

His belief in the devil is part of his prophetic message to the modern world. He believed in the reality of the devil in his day, and so he can make us aware of the reality of Satan as one of the perennial truths in the gospel for our times.

Chesterton's belief in the devil is an essential part of his prophetic mission. “If you don't believe in the devil you will lack the fighting spirit exemplified by Christ when he said to the disciples as they returned from their first mission: ‘I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky.’²² What is that

²²Luke: 10:18.

but a shout of victory in a battle!”²³ If you don’t believe in the devil you will attribute all the colossal evils in the world to human beings. Yes, we are capable of much evil, but there is an enormity of evil in some events that cannot be explained except by the presence of other evil forces besides human perversity. If you don’t believe in the devil you will lack the vigilance that the Lord counsels in so many of his parables.

Belief in the devil is an essential part of Chesterton’s message to the world, because it is an essential part of the gospel. “The whole point of Christianity is that a religion can no more afford to degrade its devil than to degrade its God.”²⁴ Like many of Chesterton’s phrases, this seems like an exaggeration. However, his point is that the whole truth of a religion must be accepted, and not just the nice, comforting aspects. Jesus thought we were capable of hearing the whole truth about reality, and that includes the devil.

Chesterton didn’t often speak explicitly about the existence of the devil as he spoke about other tendencies that would arrive in the future. He simply believed in the devil, as does the Church, and wove belief in his battle with the satanic existence in and out of his writings. He didn’t find this depressing: it was part of his faith understanding of reality. And in this also he is a prophet: he speaks this truth to every generation.

His poem, “To St. Michael, In Time of Peace,” with its theme of the great archangel who “threwest down the Dragon” and the plea to “gird us with the secret of the sword,” will form a fitting introduction to my topic:

Michael, Michael: Michael of the Morning,
Michael of the Army of the Lord,

²³ *The Everlasting Man*, p. 198.

²⁴ *The Everlasting Man*, p. 201.

Stiffen thou the hand upon the still sword, Michael,
Folded and shut upon the sheathed sword, Michael,
Under the fullness of the white robes falling,
Gird us with the secret of the sword.

When the world cracked because of a sneer in heaven,
Leaving out for all time a scar upon the sky,
Thou didst rise up against the Horror in the highest,
Dragging down the highest that looked down on the Most
High:
Rending from the seventh heaven the hell of exaltation
Down the seven heavens till the dark seas burn:
Thou that in thunder threwest down the Dragon
Knowest in what silence the Serpent can return.

Down through the universe the vast night falling,
(Michael, Michael: Michael of the Morning!)
Far down the universe the deep calms calling
(Michael, Michael: Michael of the Sword!)
Bid us not forget in the baths of all forgetfulness,
In the sigh long drawn from the frenzy and the fretfulness
In the huge holy sempiternal silence
In the beginning was the Word.

When from the deeps of dying God astounded
Angels and devils who do all but die
Seeing Him fallen where thou couldst not follow,
Seeing Him mounted where thou couldst not fly,
Hand on the hilt, thou hast halted all thy legions
Waiting the Tetelestai and the acclaim,
Swords that salute Him dead and everlasting
God beyond God and greater than His Name.

Round us and over us the cold thoughts creeping
(Michael, Michael: Michael of the battle-cry!)
Round us and under us the thronged world sleeping
(Michael, Michael: Michael of the Charge!)
Guard us the Word; the trysting and the trusting
Edge upon the honour and the blade unrusting
Fine as the hair and tauter than the harpstring
Ready as when it rang upon the targe.

He that giveth peace unto us; not as the world giveth:
He that giveth law unto us; not as the scribes:
Shall he be softened for the softening of the cities
Patient in usury; delicate in bribes?
They that come to quiet us, saying the sword is broken,
Break man with famine, fetter them with gold,
Sell them as sheep; and He shall know the selling
For He was more than murdered. He was sold.

Michael, Michael: Michael of the Mustering,
Michael of the marching on the mountains of the Lord,
Marshal the world and purge of rot and riot
Rule through the world till all the world be quiet:
Only establish when the world is broken
What is unbroken is the word.²⁵

²⁵ G.K. Chesterton, "To St. Michael in Time of Peace." This poem was first published in *The Legion Book* (London 1929), and again in *G.K.'s Weekly* (September 24, 1936). The poem also appeared in *The Chesterton Review*, Vol. XVI, No. 2, May 1990, Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey.