1 Demonology and Biblical Psychology

Pneuma, psychē and sarx in the context of demonic influence. How does an evil spirit reach a person's reason and will?

The question of the manner in which an evil spirit acts upon the human psyche requires combining three orders: biblical exegesis, theological anthropology, and subsequent philosophical reflection. The New Testament itself speaks with full seriousness about temptation, deception, the activity of "unclean spirits," and even of their "entering" a person. It does not, however, present a systematic description of the mechanism by which a demon would penetrate the psychic faculties. Biblical authors primarily describe what happens to the person: their reason can be led astray, the heart filled with falsehood, the will inclined to betrayal, the imagination assaulted by fear, and the body subjected to violent oppression.

Later theology, especially in the synthesis of St. Thomas Aquinas, seeks to explain this process more precisely. Its basic answer is: a demon does not have direct power over the core of human freedom. It cannot create an act of the will, force a person to moral consent, nor know all the secrets of a person's heart as God knows them. It can, however, act indirectly — through the senses, the imagination, sensory memory, emotions, impulses, the body, the environment, and the suggested representations of apparent good. In this way it reaches the reason and the will through those faculties that supply them with material for cognition and choice.

The most important principle, then, is this: a demon can influence the conditions under which a person knows and chooses, but it does not become the master of the personal act of knowing or of free decision. It can obscure, incite, suggest, exert pressure, and exploit wounds; it cannot, however, take the place of the human "self."

1.1 1. The Bible does not present the human person as three separate parts

The starting point must be a warning against a mechanical division of the human being into three distinct elements: spirit, soul, and body. In certain Christian currents one encounters the schematic:

pneuma – spirit, the sphere of contact with God; psychē – soul, the sphere of reason, will, and emotions; sōma or sarx – body, the material sphere.

Such a scheme may have some didactic value, but it does not convey the fluidity of New Testament language. The terms pneuma, psychē, sarx, sōma, nous, dianoia, and kardia partially overlap. Their meaning depends on the author and the context.

The text 1 Tes 5,23 — "your whole spirit, soul, and body" — does not constitute a complete anthropological account. It is a prayerful enumeration emphasizing that God is to sanctify the person in their entire integrity. The USCCB biblical commentary rightly notes that Paul does not present here a philosophical analysis of the parts of the human being, but rather speaks of the whole of his natural and supernatural life. 1 Tes 5

Similarly Hbr 4,12 speaks of the word of God that penetrates "to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow." It is not a matter of providing a technical map of the human being on which one can precisely separate psychē from pneuma. The parallelism "soul–spirit" and "joints–marrow" expresses the unrestricted capacity of the word of God to reach the deepest interior of the person. The next verse clarifies the sense of the metaphor: no creature is hidden from God, who judges the "desires and thoughts of the heart". Hbr 4

Catholic anthropology therefore speaks of the unity of soul and body. Spirit and matter do not constitute two independent natures in the human being set side by side. The spiritual soul is the principle of life and the form of the body. The distinction between soul and spirit does not introduce two souls within the human person; "spirit" can indicate the opening of the human soul to God and the supernatural end. Katechism, 362–368

This unity is of fundamental importance for demonology. An influence on the body can affect emotions and thinking. An influence on the imagination can affect the state of the body. Psychological injury can make prayer difficult, and a spiritual crisis may have psychosomatic consequences. From this, however, it does not follow that the body is the "demonic part," the soul the "field of battle," and the spirit an untouchable chamber. A human being always experiences good, evil, grace, and temptation as one person.

1.2 2. Pneuma – the polysemy of the concept of spirit

The Greek noun pneuma derives from a root associated with wind, breath, and exhalation. In the New Testament it can denote:

- the Holy Spirit;
- the human spirit;
- a mode of inward disposition;
- power or inspiration;
- an angel;
- an evil spirit;
- a principle of life;
- a spiritual reality contrasted with what is merely earthly.

Therefore the mere occurrence of the word pneuma does not yet indicate what kind of reality is in view. The determination and the context decide: "Spirit of God", "Holy Spirit", "spirit of a person", "spirit of slavery", "spirit of fear", "spirit of the world", "unclean spirit", "mute spirit", "evil spirit".

The human spirit

When Paul speaks of the human spirit he may mean its deepest, conscious interior, especially in relation to God. In 1 Kor 2,11 he asks: "For who among men knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?" This does not mean that pneuma is a distinct person hidden inside the human being. It denotes the human "I" in its capacity for self-knowledge and openness to the action of God.

In Rz 8,16 the Holy Spirit "testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." Here we have a distinction between the Spirit of God and the human spirit, but at the same time their relation. The human spirit is the space for receiving testimony and grace, not an autonomous divine fragment of the person.

Unclean spirit

The designation pneuma akatharton — "unclean spirit" — in the Gospels refers to a personal demonic reality. "Uncleanliness" does not describe material defilement but moral and religious opposition to the holiness of God. The unclean spirit is a spiritual creature whose will remains radically disordered.

One must decisively distinguish an evil spirit from the "spirit of a person." Possession does not mean that the demon becomes the human soul or unites with it substantially. In the Gospel texts the evil spirit remains a subject distinct from the person:

- speaks to the person or through him;
- "enters" and "goes out";

- can be cast out;
- recognizes the authority of Jesus;
- attempts to resist the command of Christ.

It is precisely the possibility of expelling the demon and of the person's recovery of personal integrity that shows the demon never became part of that person's personal nature.

1.3 3. The human spirit is not an area accessible to a demon as it is to God

In the language of popular demonology one sometimes encounters the claim that a demon can enter the "soul" but cannot touch the "spirit", or conversely that the gravest form of enslavement consists in the domination of the human spirit. Both ways of speaking are problematic.

Scripture does not present the human spirit as a separate compartment into which the Holy Spirit or a demon may enter in turn. The human being is a person, and his relation to God is personal and moral. An evil spirit may incline a person to close himself to God, but it cannot become the principle of the existence of his soul.

The spiritual soul is created directly by God. A demon cannot create it, ontologically usurp it, or replace it. Even in cases of severe possession the person does not cease to be himself. His capacity to outwardly express his "I" may be periodically disturbed, but personal substance, dignity, and fundamental belonging to God are not annihilated.

Therefore the sacramental character of baptism cannot be removed by a demon. An evil spirit can hinder a person's life in conformity with grace, but it cannot "erase" God's action in the soul.

1.4 4. Psychē – soul, life, person

The Greek noun psychē has a very wide range of meanings. Its New Testament usage remains under the influence of the Hebrew nefeš, which did not simply denote the immaterial part of a person enclosed within the body. It could mean life, a living being, a person, the throat as the place of breath, desire, or the person himself.

In the New Testament psychē can therefore mean:

biological life: someone "gives up his soul," i.e. life; a person: "three thousand souls" means three thousand people; the inner person; the seat of desire, sorrow, and fear; a life that can be saved or lost; a soul that endures after death.

When Jesus says that the Good Shepherd "lays down his life" for the sheep, he uses the word psychē. When his soul is "sorrowful unto death," psychē is likewise meant. The term thus encompasses both life and deep personal experience.

One therefore cannot automatically equate psychē with the modern concept of the psyche or with a specific set of faculties such as intellect, will, and emotions. Biblical psychē is rather the living, feeling, and accountable "I" before God.

1.5 5. Can a demon take possession of the soul?

Strictly speaking, a demon cannot become the owner of the soul nor its inner principle. It can exert influence on the person, and in cases of possession it can gain particular power over the person's bodily and sensory functions. It does not, however, have the kind of relation to the soul that God has as Creator. Only God:

directly creates the soul; sustains it in existence; knows it fully; can act in its deepest center as the first cause; can bestow grace upon it; can move the will from within without destroying its freedom.
A demon acts as a created and external cause with respect to the personal act of the will. It can affect the psychophysical conditions of a person's activity, but it cannot transform an act of its own will into an act of the human will.
In this sense the traditional expression "possession of the body" is more precise than "possession of the soul," provided it is not understood too materialistically. A demon can gain access to the bodily and psychophysical apparatus through which a person normally expresses themselves, but does not substantially take over their spiritual "self."

1.6 6. Sarx – body, corporeality and the condition "according to the flesh"

The term sarx literally means "body" or "flesh," but in Paul's letters it takes on several meanings:
the physical body; origin and kinship; human weakness; the person in their earthly condition; a way of life closed to God; human nature wounded by sin; the realm of disordered desires.
The most important distinction is between sarx and sōma. Sōma usually denotes the body as an integral dimension of the person. The body can become the temple of the Holy Spirit, can serve righteousness, and is destined to be raised. Sarx, especially in Paul's polemical texts, can, by contrast, denote not matter in itself but the human being living "according to the flesh" — closed to the Spirit and under the dominion of sin.
Paul does not teach that matter is evil nor that the body is the natural dwelling of a demon. The Son of God indeed "became flesh" — sarx egeneto — and therefore sarx itself cannot signify a demonic substance. "Body" in a moral sense is the existence of a person who attempts to live by their own power, according to disordered desires and outside a relationship with God. The opposite of "the body" is not the immaterial part of the person but life "according to the Spirit."

1.7 7. Sarx Is Not a Demon

This distinction is of great importance for discernment. Paul distinguishes three related, yet non-identical, sources of temptation:

- "ciało" – internal disorder and desire;
- "świat" – structures, patterns and systems opposed to God;
- diabeł – a personal tempter and deceiver.

A demon may exploit the body's desire, but did not create it. After original sin human beings possess an internal inclination to disorder. Not every temptation requires a new intervention of the evil spirit. Not every sin is the consequence of a direct demonic suggestion.
St. Thomas, analyzing the "assaults of demons", states that not all human sins should be ascribed to a direct diabolical temptation. A person can sin because of his own desire, bad habits, ignorance, the influence of his environment, and personal negligence. A demon may make use of these factors, but is not necessary to explain every act of evil. Summa theologiae, I, q. 114
In Ef 2,1–3 Paul places alongside one another the action of the "ruler of the power of the air", the spirit working in the "sons of disobedience", and "the desires of our body". The text shows the cooperation of

three levels: demonic influence, the social "course of this world", and internal desire. It does not, however, identify them with one another. Ef 2

1.8 8. The Heart as the Centre of Decision

To answer the question about a demon's access to intellect and will, it is not sufficient to examine the three terms pneuma, psychē and sarx. The most important concept in biblical psychology is often the "heart" — the Hebrew lēb or lēbāb, the Greek kardia.

In the Bible the heart does not mean only feelings. It is the center of personal life:

- thinking;
- memory;
- intention;
- conscience;
- decision;
- desire;
- faith;
- unbelief;
- moral responsibility.

A person "ponders in the heart", "determines in the heart", "believes with the heart", may have a "hardened heart", a "pure heart" or a "divided heart". It is in the heart that the relation to God is decided. The Catechism describes the heart as the biblical name for the depth of the human person in which one takes a stand for God or against Him. Catechism, 368

When the Bible says that Satan "puts something into the heart", this need not mean a direct entry into the substance of the soul. It is language describing an effective suggestion that is taken up, considered, and ultimately appropriated by the human person.

1.9 9. Judas: From Suggestion to "Satan's Entry"

A particularly important model of demonic action is presented by Judas's relationship with the devil. The Gospels progressively use increasingly strong terms.

J 13,2 literally says that the devil "put into the heart" of Judas the intention to betray Jesus. This signifies a suggestion, inspiration, or incitement. In J 13,27, after receiving the piece of bread, "Satan entered into him". Luke similarly says: "Then Satan entered into Judas" (Łk 22,3).

This is not a description of the sudden removal of Judas's personality. The Gospel shows an earlier process:

- Judas belonged to the circle of the disciples;
- he was the treasurer;
- he was appropriating money;
- a distance from Jesus grew in him;
- he formed the intention to betray;
- he negotiated with the opponents of Christ;
- he sought a favorable moment;
- he carried out his plan.

The “entry of Satan” therefore signifies the culmination of the relation between demonic inspiration and a consciously cultivated human decision. Satan did not replace Judas’s will, but entered into the space that Judas had gradually opened through greed, lies, and the rejection of Jesus’ word.
Judas remains the subject responsible. Jesus says: “What you are going to do, do quickly,” not: “What the demon wants to accomplish with your body.” The evangelist concludes the scene with the sentence: “And it was night” — physical night becomes the sign of an inner decision in which a person departs from the community of light. J 13

1.10 10. “Why did Satan fill your heart?” – Ananias

In Acts 5:3 Peter asks Ananias, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?” The next verse, however, says: “Why have you conceived this deed in your heart?” Both statements interpret one another. On the one hand, the text acknowledges a real demonic action. On the other, it ascribes the decision to Ananias. A person cannot say, “Satan filled my heart, therefore I am not responsible.” Ananias permitted, developed, and carried out the scheme of deception.
The language of “filling the heart” means that the lie began to organize his decision. It is not about a one-off, involuntary thought, but about a consent that penetrated intention and deed. Acts 5
The text displays an important principle: demonic influence and human responsibility can occur simultaneously. A demonic cause does not remove the human cause. Satan suggests and strengthens; the human being accepts or rejects.

1.11 11. The mind: nōus, dianoia and noēmata

The New Testament does not confine cognition to psychē. It uses several terms to describe the sphere of understanding.
Nōus denotes the mind, the capacity to discern, a mode of thinking, an intellectual-moral orientation of the person. Paul speaks of “the renewal of the mind” (Romans 12:2), “the mind of Christ” and “the law of the mind.”
Dianoia denotes thought, understanding, the capacity to deliberate, or an attitude of mind. The command to love God “with all your mind” relates the whole of cognition to God.
Noēma can mean thought, intention, a manner of reasoning, or a design. In 2 Corinthians 11:3 Paul fears that just as the serpent deceived Eve, so the “thoughts” of the Corinthians may be corrupted and turned away from simplicity toward Christ. The immediate context is the reception of “another Jesus,” “another spirit,” and “another gospel.” 2 Corinthians 11
Demonic impact on the mind here occurs primarily through content:

- a false image of God;
- another Christ;
- a distorted Gospel;
- seemingly spiritual teaching;
- erroneous interpretation;
- a false teacher;
- a suggestion masquerading as light.

Paul adds that Satan "masquerades as an angel of light." This is extremely significant psychologically. Evil rarely appeals to the mind as manifest absurdity. It comes as apparent good, a partial truth, supposed enlightenment, or a "more spiritual" alternative.

1.12 12. How does a demon affect the mind?

The mind can be considered both as a faculty and as the actual exercise of that faculty. A demon does not substantially destroy the intellect and does not implant its own act of knowing in it. It can, however, influence the material that the mind receives and interprets.

The primary routes of such influence are:

Presenting the object of thought

Temptation may appear as the presentation of a specific action, image, possibility, or argument. This is how the tempter acts in the wilderness: he utters a proposal and interprets Jesus' situation. He does not coerce the intellect but supplies the content to it.

Distorting the ordering of goods

The demon does not need to persuade that evil is an absolute good. It suffices to present a partial good as supreme: security over faithfulness, pleasure over love, knowledge over truth, effectiveness over justice.

Exploiting error

The evil spirit may exploit already existing false convictions, gaps in knowledge, stereotypes, and religious deformities. It does not create the entire psychological structure from scratch; it recognizes and exploits existing weaknesses.

Stoking intrusive associations

By influencing imagination and memory it can supply images and associations that impede calm judgment. The mere presence of such a thought is not yet sin nor human consent.

Influence through emotions

Strong fear, anger, desire, or sorrow can narrow the field of attention. The mind still functions, but has impaired access to the full picture of the situation. The demon does not need to directly "switch off the mind"; it can stir passions that hinder objective judgment.

False signs and authorities

A person apprehends truth also socially. A false prophet, group, ideology, or pseudo-spiritual authority can provide an entire interpretive framework. In that case demonic influence need not take the form of an internal voice. It can operate through a culture of falsehood.

1.13 13. Does a demon read thoughts?

The classical answer of Catholic theology is: a demon does not know directly and infallibly the secrets of the human heart. Such knowledge belongs to God.

St. Thomas distinguishes the interior act of the free intellect and will from their external and psychophysical signs. An angel — and therefore also a fallen angel — can know material things, behaviors, bodily reactions, and images associated with the sensory faculties. He does not, however, know the secret act of the will by his natural power alone. Summa theologiae, I, q. 57, a. 4

This does not mean that a demon is psychologically naive. As a spirit with intelligence surpassing that of humans he can:

observe behavior; know the history of a person's actions; recognize entrenched habits; analyze physiological reactions; predict probable decisions; test a person through successive temptations; infer from the effects of previous suggestions.

A demon may therefore not "read" a hidden decision and yet predict it very accurately. Similarly, an experienced human can infer much from tone of voice, gestures, and conduct, although he does not know the other's interior. In the case of angelic intelligence the capacity for such inference is incomparably greater, yet it still does not become divine omniscience.

Temptation can also be understood as a trial. A demon suggests a specific content and observes the reaction. Subsequent temptations are adjusted to the weaknesses revealed. Thomas links the notion of tempting precisely with the idea of testing: the tempter examines in order then to harm more effectively. Summa theologiae, I, q. 114, a. 2

1.14 14. Imagination as the primary locus of indirect influence

In classical anthropology imagination does not merely denote the capacity for fantasizing. It stores and connects images supplied by the senses. The human intellect, in knowing material reality, makes use of such imaginings.

Therefore an influence on the imagination can indirectly affect the process of thinking. A demon can — within the limits permitted by God — stimulate certain images, memories, and associations. He does not thereby create an intellectual judgment. He supplies material which a person may accept, question, or reject.

This may take the form of:

a suddenly recurring image; an exaggeration of a possible danger; the memory of an old injury at the moment of decision; an image of pleasure separated from its consequences; a vision of defeat leading to despair; a false image of God as a tyrant; an image of oneself as a person entirely condemned; a suggestion presenting sin as the only way out.

An image may be very intense, but intensity is not proof of truth nor of supernatural origin. Likewise, the spontaneity of a thought does not mean that it was directly introduced by a demon. Many thoughts arise as a result of memory, habits, stress, trauma, physiological processes, and ordinary associations.

1.15 15. Memory as an area susceptible to distortion

Memory does not store the past like a perfect recording. It reproduces it selectively, in connection with current emotions and convictions. Therefore it can become a place of particularly powerful temptation.

Demonic accusation may consist not in reminding a person of something entirely false, but in bringing forth a real sin while removing from the picture God's mercy. The accuser then says, "You did this, therefore this is what you are; forgiveness does not exist for you."

In this case the true element of memory is combined with a false judgment. The temptation does not lie in the mere recollection of guilt, but in blocking the memory of salvation.

Analogously, a person may remember the harm suffered but forget the whole complexity of the one who caused it. The evil spirit can exploit such narrowed memory to sustain hatred. He does not create the past event, but influences the way in which it is presently represented to the intellect.

1.16 16. Passions and the Sensory Sphere

Man possesses feelings and passions: love, hatred, desire, disgust, hope, fear, courage, joy, sorrow, and anger. They are not in themselves morally good or bad. They acquire moral value depending on their object and on the way in which they are integrated with reason and the will.

St. Thomas holds that an angel can affect the imagination and the sensual faculty of desire, since these are connected with bodily organs. By altering images or by bodily excitation he can thus indirectly strengthen particular passions. Summa theologiae, I, q. 111

This does not mean creating a feeling out of nothing. A demon can:

- arouse fear by the image of a threat;
- intensify anger by the recollection of an injury;
- inflame desire by the image of pleasure;
- deepen sorrow by narrowing attention to a loss;
- excite vanity by the imagination of recognition;
- provoke despair by the suggestion of irreversibility.

The will then meets not a neutral object but an object "charged" with emotion. Its decision may become more difficult, yet it is not thereby automatically nullified.

1.17 17. The Body as a Channel of Influence on the Psyche

Because man is a psychophysical unity, bodily changes affect attention, memory, emotions, and the capacity for judgment. Hunger, insomnia, pain, exhaustion, illness, or tension can limit the ability to discern calmly.

The temptation of Jesus begins after a forty-day fast. The devil exploits Christ's real hunger but does not create it. He tries to transform a natural need into an argument against obedience to the Father.

An analogous pattern occurs in human life. A demon can exploit:

- fatigue;
- isolation;
- pain;
- hunger;
- the need for security;
- sexual arousal;
- post-traumatic reactions;
- disturbances of the sleep rhythm;
- existing addictions.

One must not, however, invert this reasoning and regard every somatic state as a demonic effect. Organic and psychological causes are real causes. Their naturalness does not exclude the spiritual dimension of life, but it does not authorize replacing medical diagnosis with a demonological label.

1.18 18. "Fiery Darts of the Evil One"

In Ef 6,16 Paul speaks of "fiery darts of the evil one," which are to be quenched with the shield of faith. The image does not describe physical missiles but sudden and painful attacks affecting consciousness, imagination, and feelings.

They may be:

- a blasphemous suggestion;
- a sudden temptation;
- paralyzing fear;
- accusation;
- an image of despair;
- doubt presented as absolute certainty;
- an impulse to revenge;
- a thought undermining the meaning of fidelity.

The response is the "armor of God": truth, righteousness, faith, the hope of salvation, the word of God, and prayer. Paul does not answer with techniques of manipulating one's own psyche nor by attempting to dialogue with the demon. He recommends grounding the whole person in objective goods that come from God. Ef 6

The shield of faith does not mean emotional certainty. It is an act of clinging to God despite the pressure of contrary images and feelings.

1.19 19. Can a Demon Directly Move the Will?

In classical theology the answer is: no. St. Thomas says explicitly that the interior movement of the will, as a spiritual power, belongs to God. Only God is the Creator of nature and the source of the very capacity for willing. A good or bad angel can influence the will by presenting an object, by persuasion, and by affecting the lower powers, but he cannot from within change its act as the first cause does. Summa theologiae, I, q. 111, a. 2

One must distinguish:

- movement of the will by an object;
- internal compulsion of the will.

A person can be strongly moved by an apparent good presented to them. They may be under the pressure of fear, desire, or anger. The will then acts under difficult conditions, yet it still itself makes the choice.

A demon cannot say "I will" in the place of the person. He can say: "This is worth choosing," "you have no other way out," "God has abandoned you," "revenge will restore justice." Only the human will can answer with consent.

Therefore temptation itself is not sin. Even a very intense, recurring, or repulsive thought does not constitute guilt so long as it is not voluntarily embraced.

1.20 20. Can a demon limit freedom?

The absence of direct power over the will does not mean that a demon cannot affect the degree of psychological freedom of action. Human freedom is realized through the body, the senses, emotions, memory, and reason. Severe disruption of these faculties can limit the capacity for conscious decision.

In cases of extraordinary demonic oppression the following may occur:

- severe disturbances of bodily expression;
- loss of control over particular movements;
- disruption of speech;
- paralyzing fear;
- intrusive images;

- impairment of concentration;
- periodic disturbance of the usual manner of self-expression.

If consciousness or voluntariness are genuinely limited, moral responsibility for actions performed under such pressure is also reduced. However, this is a general principle, applied also to mental illnesses, neurological conditions, addictions, and other factors that limit freedom.

One should not equate external control over the body with moral takeover of the will. A possessed person may experience actions, words, or reactions with which they do not identify internally. For this reason possession in itself is not a sin.

1.21 21. Possession as a disturbance of the soul's relation to executive faculties

The Gospel descriptions of possession present various phenomena:

- crying out;
- being thrown about;
- convulsions;
- mutism;
- self-harming behavior;
- extraordinary strength;
- social isolation;
- speech of an evil spirit through the person's mouth;
- partial loss of control over the body.

One cannot construct from this a single phenomenology applicable to every case. The Evangelists also do not assert that every occurrence of similar symptoms has a demonic cause. In their narratives disease, healings, and exorcisms are sometimes distinguished, although they may occur alongside one another.

In light of classical anthropology, possession can be understood as an extraordinary possibility of a demon affecting the bodily and sensory instruments of a person's activity. The demon does not replace the soul as the form of the body, but can periodically impede the soul's ordinary exercise of control over the executive functions.

This means that a demon can influence:

- movement;
- voice;
- sensory reactions;
- imagination;
- certain memory processes;
- emotional arousal.

From this it does not automatically follow the takeover of:

- the conscience;
- spiritual identity;
- the grace of baptism;
- the deepest act of faith;
- free consent;
- personal responsibility.

1.22 22. “Return to oneself” after deliverance

The descriptions of Jesus’ exorcisms contain an important motif of the recovery of integrity. The man from the country of the Gerasenes, after his deliverance, sits clothed and “in his right mind.” The person does not receive a new identity; he regains the possibility of expressing his own.

An exorcism thus has a person-forming and reintegrative character. The demon disperses, isolates, and disturbs unity. Christ restores the person:

- to himself;
- to the community;
- to the ability to listen;
- to a relationship with God;
- to responsible action.

It is not merely a matter of removing the intruder, but of restoring the proper ordering of the whole person.

1.23 23. Degrees of demonic influence

The biblical testimony allows one to distinguish several levels of influence, though Scripture does not provide a formal classification.

External temptation

A demon presents a possibility of action or an argument. This is how the temptation of Jesus appears. The person retains awareness and the ability to respond.

Internally experienced suggestion

The content appears in the imagination or consciousness as a thought, impulse, or image. Its source cannot be identified solely on the basis of intensity. It may arise from natural psychological processes, one’s own concupiscence, or external influence.

Deception of the intellect

A false interpretation is gradually accepted as true. A demon operates through lies, pseudoscience, ideology, false spirituality, or a distorted image of God.

Entrenched disorder of the will

A person repeatedly chooses a particular evil. A habit forms that facilitates further decisions of the same kind. A demon may exploit such a habit, but its psychological strength also results from repeated human choices.

Oppression or obsessive pressure

A persistent pressure, fear, accusation, or compulsive focus on a particular content appears. This does not yet imply consent of the will or demonic possession.

Extraordinary takeover of psychophysical functions

In possession the demon’s activity particularly concerns the body, the senses, and expression. The person may periodically lose ordinary control over behavior, but the demon does not become that person’s soul nor the moral agent of all their decisions.

1.24 24. How does the process of internal consent develop?

The most typical process of temptation can be described in the following sequence:

A stimulus, thought, image, or emotion appears. Attention rests on the presented object. The imagination develops a possible scenario. Passion endows the object with attractiveness or arouses fear. Reason

evaluates—correctly or incorrectly—the value of the action. The will inclines toward the presented good. Consent occurs. Executive faculties carry out the decision. Repetition of the act creates a habit. The habit facilitates subsequent consents.

A demon may act at many stages:

provide the stimulus; hold attention through an intense image; strengthen passion; suggest a false argument; exploit an existing error; deepen discouragement after resistance; accuse after sin is committed. It cannot, however, perform the act of moral consent for a person. Guilt does not arise at the moment of the first assault, but with appropriately informed and voluntary assent.

1.25 25. The difference between thought, temptation, and consent

In spiritual practice it is necessary to distinguish three phenomena.

A spontaneous thought may arise from memory, association, stress, physiology, or environment. It is not in itself sin.

Temptation is the presentation of evil as a good available for choice. It is still not sin if a person does not accept it.

Consent is an act of the will that takes the presented possibility as its own intention, or voluntarily lingers on it for disordered pleasure.

Failure to make this distinction can lead to scruples. A person suffering from intrusive, blasphemous, or aggressive thoughts may take the mere fact of their occurrence as evidence of sin or possession. Meanwhile, an unwanted thought may be precisely the object of the will's resistance, not its choice.

Demonic accusation readily blurs the boundary between the experience of temptation and responsibility for sin. A person is first attacked by a thought, and then accused for the mere fact of having noticed it.

1.26 26. The will can refuse consent despite strong pressure

Jesus during the temptation does indeed experience the devil's propositions. The temptation reaches his consciousness, is understood, and is rejected. The fact that a particular content appears in the field of consciousness does not mean it is accepted.

Similarly the Christian may:

feel intense anger but not choose vengeance; experience fear but remain faithful; have a blasphemous thought but not approve it; feel desire but not choose the act; experience desperate emotions but, by an act of the will, remain in hope.

Freedom does not always manifest as the absence of pressure. It often reveals itself as the ability to remain with the good despite pressure.

1.27 27. Reason as the First Line of Defense

Since the demon operates by falsifying the presented good, the essential defense is truth. Therefore Jesus replies in the wilderness with the word of Scripture. He does not engage the devil in speculative conversation about his intentions. He restores each supposed good to its proper place in relation to God.

Truth protects reason on several levels:

- the truth about God repels the image of God as a rival of humanity;
- the truth about the human person repels both pride and contempt toward oneself;
- the truth about sin prevents its trivialization;
- the truth about mercy prevents despair;

- the truth about freedom prevents fatalism;
- the truth about creation prevents a magical view of the world;
- the truth about Christ's victory prevents demonological fascination.

To the Ephesians Paul commands to "gird your loins with truth" and to take up "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Defense against the demon is primarily christological, moral, and cognitive in character, not magical.

1.28 28. Faith as the Protection of the Whole Person

Faith is not merely the intellectual assent to propositions. It is a personal entrusting of oneself to God. Therefore it can "quench the flaming darts of the Evil One."

Demonic suggestion attempts to isolate an individual thought from the whole of Revelation: "This failure proves that God has abandoned you"; "This sin means that you cannot receive forgiveness"; "This suffering shows that prayer is pointless." Faith responds by placing the experience within the larger truth about creation, the cross, redemption, and God's promises.

The shield of faith does not always remove the feeling of fear. However, it ensures that fear does not become the highest principle of decision.

1.29 29. The Holy Spirit Does Not Act Like the Demon

A comparison of the activity of the Holy Spirit and the evil spirit reveals a fundamental asymmetry.

Duch Święty:

- dwells in the person by grace;
- heals and elevates nature;
- enlightens the intellect;
- strengthens the will;
- respects and perfects freedom;
- unifies the person;
- leads to the truth;
- makes a person more fully themselves.

Demon:

- remains an external creature;
- cannot confer a new nature;
- suggests and obscures;
- strengthens disordered impulses;
- seeks to subordinate freedom;
- fragments the person;
- leads to falsehood;
- attempts to deprive a person of the ability to be themselves.

One must not therefore present the human soul as a neutral dwelling contested by two comparable spirits. The Holy Spirit acts as God, the Giver of being and of grace. The demon acts as a limited creature, which can exert only a secondary influence.

1.30 30. Psychopathology and Demonic Action

A sound demonology must respect the reality of mental and neurological illnesses. Symptoms such as:

- voices;
- intrusive thoughts;
- loss of sense of control;
- religious delusions;
- dissociation;
- self-harming behaviors;
- insomnia;
- sudden and severe emotional changes;
- convulsions;
- memory disturbances;

may have natural medical causes. Mere conformity with an external element of the Gospel description is not sufficient to recognize demonic action.

One also cannot claim that a psychiatric diagnosis automatically excludes any spiritual dimension. A person who is mentally ill remains a spiritual being, capable of faith, temptation, sin, and grace. Different levels of causality may coexist, but their coexistence must not be assumed without evidence.

The document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith devoted to Christian faith and demonology recalls both the reality of personal evil and the necessity of critical discernment of the facts. It rejects invoking the devil as an easy justification for human guilt and warns against suggestion, imagination, and erroneous interpretation of phenomena. Christian Faith and Demonology

1.31 31. The principal limits of demonic access

In the light of Scripture and classical theology, several principles can be formulated.

A demon can affect:

- external circumstances;
- the senses;
- the imagination;
- sensory memory;
- emotions and passions;
- bodily arousal;
- the content presented to the reason;
- social systems of meaning;
- existing habits and wounds;
- in extraordinary cases — bodily and executive functions.

A demon cannot by its own power:

- create a human soul;
- know infallibly all the secrets of the heart;
- become the subject of the human will;
- compel the will to moral assent;
- grant or withdraw grace;
- erase sacramental character;
- transform persons into another substance;
- nullify the freedom redeemed by Christ.

Theological synthesis

The New Testament terms pneuma, psychē, and sarx do not describe three hermetically separate parts of the human being. Pneuma can mean the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, or a personal evil spirit. Psychē denotes the soul, life, the person, and his or her inner experience. Sarx may signify the physical body, human weakness, or a way of life closed to God. None of these terms by itself points to a single "place" through which a demon automatically takes over a person.

The evil spirit reaches reason and the will indirectly. It makes use of external suggestion, images, sensory memory, emotion, bodily arousal, false argument, social falsehood, and apparent good. It can influence the material that reason evaluates as well as the emotional conditions of choice. It cannot, however, create an intellectual act or an act of free will in place of the person.

A demon may know a person through observation, experience, and analysis of his or her behavior and habits. It may test weaknesses by successive temptations. It does not, however, possess the divine capacity to fully penetrate the heart. Its knowledge is an intelligent cognition of the creature, not omniscience.

In ordinary temptation the struggle is played out at the interface of presentation, passion, the judgment of reason, and the assent of the will. In extraordinary possession a demon may obtain particular influence over the bodily and sensory instruments of a person's activity, but it does not become the person's soul and does not assume the person's moral identity.

The most dangerous demonic action does not always consist in violent manifestations. Often it is a subtle transformation of the way of thinking: portraying God as an enemy, sin as freedom, despair as realism, pride as dignity, and lies as spiritual illumination. Satan reaches the will primarily through apparent good, which he presents to reason.

The ultimate decision, however, remains the person's decision. The evil spirit may besiege freedom, but it is neither its creator nor its owner. Therefore the New Testament combines a realism of spiritual combat with the call to responsibility: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" and "Be watchful and sober." A person is not a helpless terrain for a clash of spirits. In Christ the person remains a subject capable of recognizing the truth, rejecting falsehood, and, by grace, turning the whole of his or her spirit, soul, and body toward God.