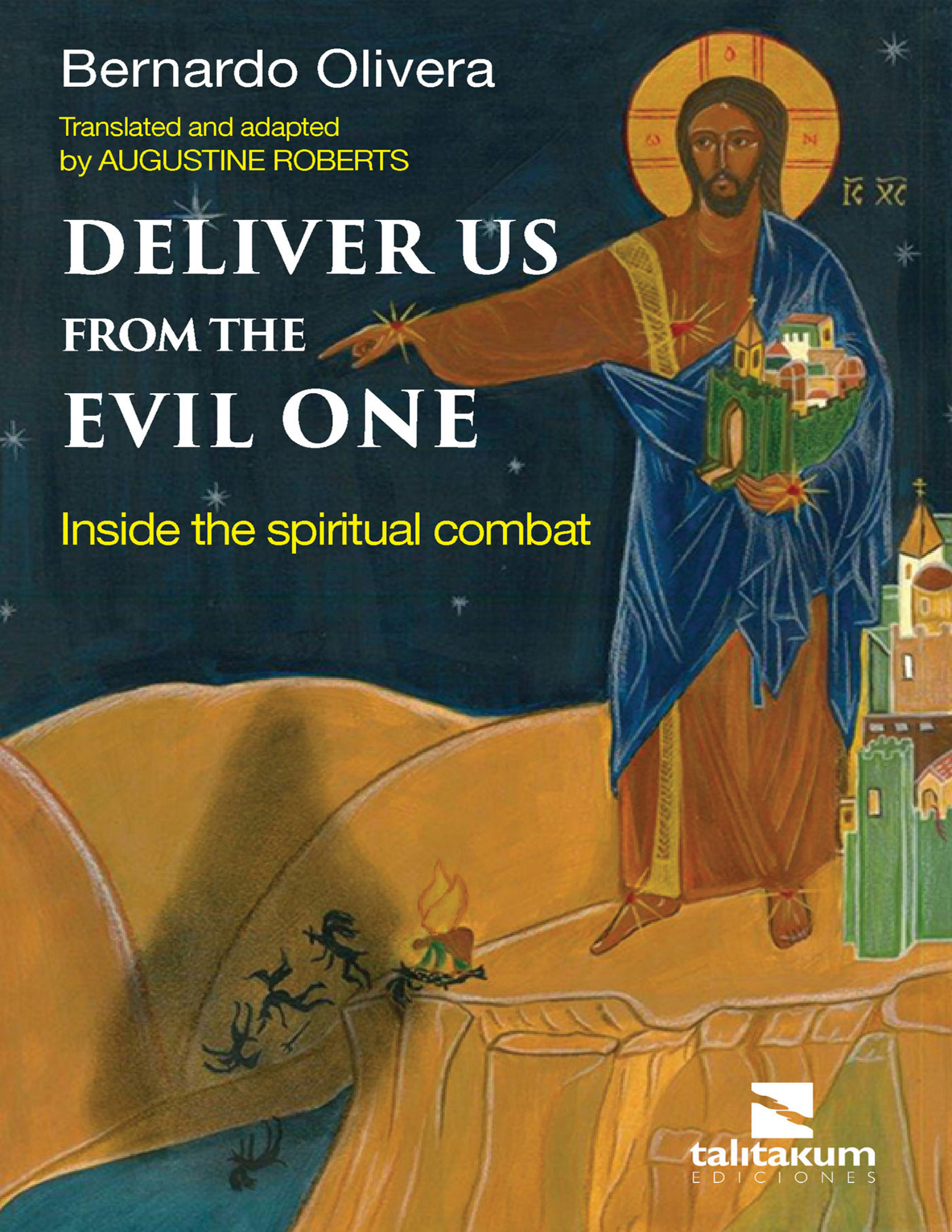


Bernardo Olivera

Translated and adapted
by AUGUSTINE ROBERTS

DELIVER US
FROM THE
EVIL ONE

Inside the spiritual combat



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Inside the Spiritual Combat

by

Bernardo Olivera

*with a Prologue by
the Archbishop of La Plata*

Translated and adapted
by Augustine Roberts



Olivera, Bernardo

Deliver us from the Evil One : inside the spiritual combat / Bernardo Olivera. - 1a ed. - Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires : Talita Kum Ediciones, 2021.

Libro digital, EPUB

Archivo Digital: descarga y online

Traducción de: Agustín Roberts.

ISBN 978-987-4043-37-5

1. Demonio. 2. Iglesia Católica. 3. Espiritualidad. I. Roberts, Agustín, trad. II. Título.

CDD 235.4

© Talita Kum Ediciones, Buenos Aires, 2021

www.talitakumediciones.com.ar

editorial@talitakumediciones.com.ar

First Edition: september 2021.

ISBN: 978-987-4043-37-5



©Translation and adaptation of the title in Spanish *Libranos del Malo. El combate espiritual. 3°.ed.* Talita Kum Ediciones, 2019.

Design: Talita Kum Ediciones

Cover image: Icon “Deliver us from the evil one” by Sergio Rivero, ocso

Made the deposit provided by law 11,723

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*Evil is not just a lack, but an active presence,
a person who is alive, spiritual, depraved and a depraver.
He is the wicked one, a mysterious and terrifying reality.
Whoever refuses to acknowledge his existence or thinks of him
as an autonomous principle not created by God like every other being,
as a symbolic reality, a conceptual personification
concocted to explain the unknown causes for our troubles,
is automatically separated from what the Bible and the Church teach.*

Saint Paul VI, General Audience of Nov. 15, 1972

*They wanted and still want us to believe that the Devil is a myth,
a figure, an idea, the idea of evil,
but the Devil exists and we have to fight him.*

Pope Francis, Homily at Saint Martha's, Oct. 30, 2014

Index

PROLOGUE

INTRODUCTION

Part I BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Chapter 1 Satan against Jesus

Chapter 2 Jesus against Satan

The Historical Jesus

Confrontations in the Gospels

Conclusions

Chapter 3 The Church against Satan

Acts of the Apostles

Paul and John

Conclusions to Part I

Part II SPIRITUAL TRADITION

Chapter 4 The Desert Fathers

Saint Anthony the Great

Lethargy (acedia) and How to Treat it

Chapter 5 Saint Ignatius of Loyola

Directions for Desolation, Consolation and Temptation

Chapter 6 Saint John Henry Newman

Conclusions to Part II

Part III THEOLOGY AND CHURCH TEACHING

Chapter 7 The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries

The Fourth Lateran Council

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Chapter 8 The Contemporary Context

Vatican Council II and the Theological Crisis

Saints Paul VI and John Paul II

The Catechism of the Catholic Church and the New Ritual

Part IV GENERAL PASTORAL ACTION

Chapter 9 History and its Lessons

Historical Overview

Current events

Diabolical Activity

Chapter 10 The Sexual Revolution

Gender Theory

Chapter 11 Other Attacks and Counterattacks

Obsession and Harassment

Infestation and Witchcraft

Chapter 12 Possession and our Defenses

Possession and Exorcism

Other Defenses against the Enemy

Chapter 13 General Conclusions

APPENDIX

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH

AUTHOR'S BIBLIOGRAPHY IN SPANISH

PROLOGUE

The ten or fifteen years after the Second Vatican Council represented a period of intense purification for the Catholic Church in general.¹ Many different thought patterns tended to cloud the shining light of the Gospel. Even so, it was striking that Pope Paul VI proclaimed that defending ourselves from the Devil was “one of the Church’s greatest needs.”

What was even more surprising was the force with which he warned against the temptation to simply eliminate the Devil from Christian thought, “Whoever refuses to recognize the Devil’s existence has gone outside the frame of what the Bible and the Church teach.” At the same time, the Pope warned of a more subtle way of denying the reality of the Evil One, such as when someone explains the Devil “as a symbolic reality, a conceptual personification concocted to explain the unknown causes for our troubles.”²

Many of us have fallen into a certain disgust or naive denial of the active reality of the Evil One, but with time our personal struggles with evil help us to return to a healthy spiritual realism. Pope Francis has recently surprised us with several statements in his homilies and catecheses that echo those of Saint Paul VI and reveal the attitude of a father who warns his children not to be deceived and so fall into a trap. I recall several of his expression in this regard:

“We, too, experience the Devil’s attacks, because the spirit of evil does not like us to pursue holiness.” “We need the shield of faith, because the Devil does not throw us flowers, but burning arrows to assassinate us.” “We should not be naive: do you understand? We need to learn from the Gospel how to fight against the Devil.” “In those days they often confused epilepsy with demonic possession, but we can be sure that the Devil really existed.... The Devil is present on the first page of the Bible and the Bible ends with his presence, the victory of God over the Devil.” “Please, don’t make deals with the Devil! He wants to come back to his home and take possession of us.... Don’t take him lightly! Watch out! And stay with Jesus always!” “The Devil’s cleverness

consists precisely in making us think that he does not exist.” “This generation and many others have been led to think that the Devil is a myth, a figure of speech, an idea of evil, but the Devil exists and we have to fight him!” “The Devil distracts us by luring us into passing pleasures and superficial entertainment, so we squander all the gifts God has given us.”³

It is now clear that the last petition of the Our Father, the Lord’s Prayer, is, “Deliver us from the Evil One.” It does not refer to evil in general, but specifically to the Evil One. Pope Francis reminded us of this when he commented on the Our Father. It is vital at every moment of the day, because the Our Father is a prayer for every day, which is why we ask for our daily bread, what we need to keep living for the day ahead (*ton epiousion* – for the coming day: Mt 6:11).

Moreover, the fact that Jesus himself “felt” the temptation of the Devil, even though it was impossible for him to fall into the trap, shows how much our human nature is threatened by the Evil One. The father of lies knows how to masquerade as an angel of light and damage the Church through our own negligence. He sows disdain and vanity underneath the defense of truth, self-satisfaction hiding under apparent wisdom, and violence beneath shows of strength.

However, is not enough to recognize the existence of the Devil or to enter into deep discussions about his precise nature. It is much better to ask ourselves what spiritual influence this real person has in our life. How does he relate to our personal path of holiness? That is why the subtitle of this book is “*Inside the Spiritual Combat*”. It could not be otherwise, given that a monk has written it from his own search for holiness and from the birth pangs of spiritual accompaniment.

He knows the joy of a true spiritual master who sees how his sons and daughters overcome their trials and how God opens up his own road in their life, letting them celebrate another victory over the power of the Evil One. That is why Jesus rejoiced so much with his disciples when they had fully given themselves to their mission of spreading the Gospel: “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning” (Lk 10:18).

These pages will help us to understand an element in the teaching of Pope Francis that is relatively unappreciated. He teaches us that recognizing God’s

mercy does not mean being lax or giving up the fight against whatever can harm us. We often give way to our own weakness and sense of inferiority by not accepting our life, especially our spiritual life, as a combat. The struggle to stay on our feet is actually an expression of worth as persons, since that is how we acknowledge that our Father in heaven know us and loves us.

This book penetrates into an element of our faith that requires a specifically supernatural viewpoint. Although human reason can deduce God's existence and that of a transcendent world – and even non-believers often repeat the words of Jesus – the reality of the Devil and his power is different. Acknowledging his existence and his influence presupposes accepting divine revelation and its ability to look at reality through eyes that are not of this world. The Devil is the unavoidable dark background of any healthy Christian vision of our existence on earth.

The book also helps us put into practice the advice of the many spiritual teachers who have spoken realistically about the most insidious temptations of the Devil, namely apathy, boredom, laziness and embitterment. Against such attitudes, the call for patience rings out to summon us to a very different mission from that of seeking success or victory in the world's eyes.

Precisely because we live in a world of seeing and feeling, any healthy spirituality has to be aware of how an atmosphere of images, sensations and experiences can be an instrument of the Devil, just as the Desert Fathers taught. This means that persons who are unable to live beyond this level of experience expose themselves to the enemy. Thus the advice of the traditional spiritual masters of the last two thousand years becomes newly relevant today, especially the rules of discernment of Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

I also want to emphasize that the author of this book, who writes with the same firm conviction and fatherly concern as we see in Pope Francis when he speaks about the Devil, also reminds us that the power of the Evil One is limited. God himself restricts the Devil's action, because he always seeks the greater good of us humans, even to the point of drawing good for the victim from the evil the Devil tries to achieve. The Evil One tries to show forth a power that he really does not possess and we have to be careful to avoid being tricked by him. The secret is to entrust ourselves every night to the loving arms of our Heavenly Father and putting on our armor every morning.

We thank Bernardo, monk and brother, for his contribution to the Church's life and particularly for this book that comes from his own experience of constant prayer. Your prayer, dear brother, is an important part of our protecting armor.

Víctor Manuel Fernandez

Archbishop of La Plata

Former Rector of the Pontifical Catholic University of Buenos Aires

¹ The adapted translation of this book is made from the original Spanish edition, *Libranos del Malo: El combate espiritual* (Buenos Aires: Talita Kum Ediciones, 2018). All verses from Sacred Scripture are from *The New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990). The quotations from recent Popes, the Second Vatican Council and the Roman Congregations, unless otherwise indicated, are downloaded and sometimes translated from <http://w2.vatican.va/content.html>. The three most quoted documents from Vatican II are *Lumen Gentium* on the Church, *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the Modern World and *Dei Verbum* on Divine Revelation, abbreviated respectively as LG, GS and DV. The word, "Gospel," is capitalized when it refers to the four written Gospels, but not when used as an adjective, as in "the gospel message." To avoid confusion, the word, "Devil" is capitalized when he refers to the person of Satan. The other devils are demons.

² Catechesis of November 15, 1972.

³ These quotations from Pope Francis are respectively from his Homilies at Saint Martha's, April 11, 2014; October 30, 2014; October 10, 2013; from his Message to the Italian Association of Exorcists, October 27, 2014; from his Homily at Saint Martha's on October 30, 2014; and the one from his Mass at Rizal Park, Manila, January 18, 2015.

INTRODUCTION

We do not need to live long before wondering like Job, “Do not human beings have a hard service on earth?” (Job 7:1). When we try to live for God, we see the wisdom of Sirach, “My child, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for testing” (Sir 2:1). Saint Paul himself preached God’s Good News in Thessalonica “in spite of great opposition” (1 Thess 2:2).

The spiritual combat began long ago. The Apocalypse says, “War broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 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).

Despite his rejection from heaven, Satan’s combat did not end: “When the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness” (vv.13-14).

Jesus told his disciples, that the Devil “does not stand in the truth” (Jn 8:44) and much later his disciple Peter wrote, “God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment” (2 Pet 2:4).

In his parable of the sower, Jesus warns us about the different enemies who can kidnap or kill the Word of God sown in our heart. The fact that Matthew, Mark and Luke all have this parable shows its importance and they call our different enemies by name. *Satan* is the one who comes and snatches away what was sown in the heart. This Evil One is not just a weakness, but an active power, a living spiritual being who perverts others, because he himself is a

perverter. In his parable, Jesus refers to the “flesh” and the “world”. Our *flesh* is a fickle entity that has no roots, since it is the disordered interior of a human being. It either feels no need of God’s grace and so refuses to ask for it, or cannot adequately receive it. The *world* refers to our worldly concerns that try to seduce us by different kinds of idols and riches that close us off to salvation and plunge us into sin.

One keen strategist of this spiritual combat was Saint John of the Cross. He describes the human soul as dressed with well-chosen garments and thus free from the attacks of the Devil, the world and the flesh:

Faith is like an inner, dazzlingly white robe, by which the soul avoids all the trickeries of the Devil, who is our strongest and most clever enemy.

Hope is a second layer over the robe of faith, to protect us from our second enemy, the world, by keeping our gaze fixed on eternal life. In its light, the attractions of this world seem to dry up and become worthless.

Charity is like an outer garment. It completely protects any person from the attacks of the third enemy, the flesh, “for where there is true love of God, love of self and of one’s possessions finds no entry.”⁴ This is especially important, since our most stubborn enemy is love of the things of this world. Its attacks persist as long as self-love exists.

The Church, with its many centuries of experience down to the present day, understands this deeper meaning of our life on earth and teaches that behind suffering and death, there is a sinister person at work. The Second Vatican Council explained it:

Although humans were made by God in a state of holiness, from the very onset of their history they abused his liberty at the urging of the Evil One. They set themselves against God and sought to attain their goal apart from God.... What divine revelation makes known to us agrees with our own experience.... We are split within ourselves, and as a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness. Indeed, we find that by ourselves we are incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully, so that everyone feels bound

by chains. But the Lord Himself came to free and strengthen us, renewing humankind inwardly and casting out that “ruler of this world” (Jn 12:31) who held us in the bondage of sin (Jn 8:34).⁵

The purpose of this book is to speak very concretely about this struggle against the evil spirit and his cohorts. The name of this fallen angel is Satan, the Devil, the Evil One, the Adversary, Enemy, Tempter, Liar and Murderer. Saint Paul says that we fight “against the Rulers, against the Authorities, against the Cosmic Powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil” (Eph 6:12). Our combat is against them and not simply against flesh and blood.

The variety of names used for the evil spirits points to the fact that Christian revelation is more interested in their activity than in their nature; not so much in what they are or live, but in how they fight us, accuse us, and seduce us.⁶

Obviously, if we do not believe in the existence of evil spirits or fallen angels, neither will we believe in their pernicious action. These pages, however, are not for unbelievers or indifferent believers, but for those who sincerely accept the Bible’s revelation of God and the healthy tradition of the Christian Church. My hope is that anyone of good will can find something useful here, especially an explanation of certain experiences that trouble and perturb us humans.

In other words, this book is for those who sincerely try to grow in their spiritual life as integral human beings, knowing that God begins, accompanies and crowns all our work. It is not for those who are simply curious, or who constantly feed their life on earth with novelties, without really assimilating anything. On the other hand, the book is not for experts on demonology, but is rather an introduction for those who want to have some solid knowledge about the actions of the Devil and how we can defend ourselves from his trickeries.

Two advertencies can be useful here: first, the best defense against the Evil One is to know that he exists and to kill him with disdain, since he digs his own grave with the shovel of his vanity; and secondly, knowing about him is the best way to avoid both fantasies and groundless fears.

Perhaps the book’s title could provoke the question, why “Deliver us from the Evil One” and not “Deliver us from Evil”? The evil from which we want

God to deliver us is, above all, a disturbing person, a fallen angel, the Evil One, the Tempter named Satan, who wants to separate us from God's kingdom and God's will. Sin entered into the world through this Evil One and all our misery has come through sin. In the prayer he gave us, Jesus is telling us to ask our heavenly Father to free us from Satan, as well as from all forms of evil, especially moral evil.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says in its commentary on the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, "In this petition, evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God. The Devil (*diabolos*) is the one who 'throws himself across God's plan and his work of salvation accomplished in Christ.'"7

For these different reasons, we begin by looking at the Bible and the Church's spiritual tradition, then its theological development and official teaching. This will give us the necessary foundations for interpreting present-day demonic experiences in the light of faith.

Every extreme position has its corresponding opposite opinion and we know that a rational "minimalism", which says that the Devil does not exist or if it exists does not act, contrasts with a "maximalist" pan-demonology. This latter tendency sees demons everywhere and forgets the influence of secondary causes, such as the flesh and the world, which enter into our temptations.

Today as always, there is a discussion about good and bad angels. The "New Age" is a notorious example of this, with the result that there can be a real danger of asserting something as part of the Church's faith, whereas in reality it is not.

Sometimes, however, the contrary can happen and someone can overlook basic aspects of revealed truth. The truth about angels is a secondary part of divine revelation, but at the same time it is inseparable from its central truth, which is the majestic reality of God the Creator, shining forth in all of visible and invisible creation, and the equally majestic fact of God the Savior, dynamically active in human history.

As general guidelines in this, it is worth considering the following three pastoral principles:

1. *The supreme role of freedom*, in both the intellect and the will. This

means that the Devil cannot act directly against human freedom, although he can work on the imagination and emotions, and thus influence our free will indirectly. Our freedom of conscience is the sanctuary in our heart, where we are alone with our Lord and Creator.

2. *Grace and disgrace.* The disgrace of our human nature results from the Devil's action, which caused a fundamental wound in what God created as very good. Our humanity is wounded by original sin and by our own sins, weaknesses and infirmities. Just as divine grace builds on and transforms our innate human dignity, in a similar way the disgrace of the Devil's action enters, tempts us to evil and tries to disrupt God's plan.
3. *The wisdom of gradual discernment.* Wisdom requires that we first look at the circumstances and natural explanations of any phenomenon, before thinking of any preternatural intervention or the action of a pure spirit, in this case an Evil One.

⁴ John of the Cross, *The Dark Night* II, XXI, 10, in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*. trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington: ICS Publications, 1973), 380.

⁵ GS 13.

⁶ There is one exception to this in Sacred Scripture, in the Letter of James 2:19: "The demons believe and shudder," which is open to different interpretations, but could easily be referring to the reaction of evil spirits when God's name is invoked over them in exorcisms.

⁷ *Catechism* 2851.

Part I

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

God's revealed Word in Sacred Scripture means interpreting the gospel message in the same Spirit in which it was first transmitted by Christ himself to the Apostles, preached by them to the first Christian generation and then written by the evangelists under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.⁸

This process, which developed during the whole life of the Apostles, permitted a much deeper understanding of Jesus' teaching, then reducing it to a synthesis and adapting it to their respective audiences and readers. In God's wisdom, this has let us appreciate the immense richness of the gospel message and share in the historical reality of the life of Christ.

An alert reader of the Gospels will know how to understand them in the light of authentic Christian traditions.⁹ On the contrary, when reflection on the Gospel is only personal and not based on the foundation of consistent Christian tradition, the Bible is filtered through an unhealthy mentality and is no longer the soul of any healthy spiritual teaching. In the same way, when any form of teaching or meditation fails to interpret Scripture in the light of the Church's long spiritual tradition, it has no solid foundation.

⁸ See DV 7: "Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion, commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men that Gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching.... This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by observances handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, by those Apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing"

⁹ See DV 8: "This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. (5) For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who

treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.”

Chapter 1

Satan against Jesus

Jesus Christ, who “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8), took on all human wounds, was tempted by the Devil and experienced the Evil One’s fallacies. Even at the very start of Christ’s life on earth, an agent of Satan named Herod wanted to get rid of him and ordered the slaughter of many innocent young children.

Temptations in the Desert

The Bible’s history of salvation lets us see that Jesus’ temptations in the desert at the beginning of his public life were announced well beforehand: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gn 3:15). Just as in Eve’s original seduction, in Christ’s temptations there was an enticing offer for the future, but Jesus would not be seduced, since he is the woman’s “offspring” referred to here. In him, there is no complicity with evil.

The writers of the Gospels stylized Jesus’ temptations in way similar to what they did in many other episodes appearing in the Gospels, so that there are different ways to interpret them. The Gospels give us three ways, the first of which is to see them as moral exhortations, similar to what we often hear in sermons and homilies. In this case, Jesus faced the typical human temptations of self-satisfaction, pride and vanity in order to give us an example of how to struggle against them.

A second possible interpretation is doctrinal and sees Jesus as affirming his divine Sonship, which the Father had just revealed in Jesus’ baptism. His reaction to the temptations shows his docility to the Word of God. He conquers Satan through that Word and confirms his relationship to the Father by obeying the Scriptures.

The third possibility is messianic and seems to be the most likely