



THE LAST ENEMY

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The Last Enemy (as named by St. Paul in 1Cor 15:26) was also the first enemy, and has been our enemy throughout human existence: it is death. Death is more than the separation of the soul from the body, it is the threat of non-being. In the writings of the Fathers, particularly those of the East, being is equated with goodness. For it was God who called all things into existence and saw that they were "very good." As such, being and goodness are deeply and utterly intertwined. We do not say that any created thing is inherently evil. If it has existence, that existence is good. This same fundamental understanding yields its opposite: non-being has the character of evil, or, more accurately, we can say that what we term as "evil" is simply the character and work of non-being. So, Jesus says of Satan that "he was a murderer from the beginning," and "he is the father of lies."

In the work of the fathers, most famously in St. Dionysius, evil is described as a "parasite." It has no existence of its own but rather works to pervert that which does have existence. So evil is not a "thing" or something "existing." Rather, it is a will, a perversion, a misdirection and an attempt to direct being towards non-being. This is the ultimate rebellion against the goodness of God who is Being, "Being beyond all being," the source of all existence and every good thing.

There are a variety of ways that this movement towards non-being manifests itself in our lives.

Christ describes two of them. He tells us that if we are angry with our brother, we have committed murder. He also says that if we lust after someone, we have committed adultery. Both this "murder" and this "adultery" are true on the level of being. They are actions that attempt to reduce the being of another. As such, they are actions of Satan, "the murderer from the beginning," and the "father of lies."

We also seek to kill ourselves throughout the day. In subtle ways and choices, we often make moves towards lesser being or even non-being itself. The false identities and consumer-based personalities that often fill our closets or inhabit our anxieties are not part of the path to the truth or the reality of being. When Christ says that He has come to "bring life, and that more abundantly," He is pointing towards the fullness of being that is grounded in God Himself.

It is the nature of our modern culture that it constantly drives us to be what we are not or to become someone (or something) other than ourselves. The ground of our culture is the economy, while the ground of being human is communion with God. Christ is quite clear: "You cannot serve God and mammon (money)." The power of money, and its allure, is its ability to generate pleasure, and forestall

pain, neither of which are sinful nor death-dealing in and of themselves. It is, however, the secular nature of the context in which they occur that make them harmful.

Christ said, "There is none good but God." It is a grounding of the good, as it is the grounding of being as well. A plant that has been up-rooted dies. Human beings do as well, though the death is slow and takes a myriad of forms.

Our rooting in God ("in Him we live and move and have our being" Acts 17:28) is essential. The moral compass of a culture in which the Christian tradition is dominant is insufficient to give life. It is, however, of use in preventing a culture from spinning into worlds of death-dealing nonsense. For all intents and purposes, that compass has disappeared for the larger part of our culture purveyors. We are not only dying, but dying in increasingly bizarre ways.

The New Testament occasionally makes comments about "lawlessness." St. John equates sin and lawlessness (1Jn 3:4). When our communion with God is disrupted, lawlessness is the result. That is to say, the inner law, the natural compass of our well-being, begins to malfunction. We lose our direction. Our actions (even intended "good" actions) can become corrupted and serve only to destroy our lives. That this takes place on a cultural level is deeply alarming. Historically, cultures serve as something of a hedge around our lives. They cannot make us good, but they encourage us towards the good and turn us away from evil. Today, this is decreasingly true.

God has given us more than the background of culture with its shifting laws and mores. He has primarily given us the Church, together with its Tradition, and the life of the sacraments. This is more than a protective "garment of skin" (as the Fathers sometimes described the protection of laws and customs). The Church makes possible our active grounding in the communion of life itself. This is the content of all of the sacraments and the basis for the whole reality of the Church. The canons and moral teachings serve the purpose of nurturing us in the true life of Christ (they are not mere laws of outward conformity).

This reality makes it utterly important that the voices who seek to change the Church's teaching or discipline to conform it to modern cultural norms should be ignored and resisted. Our culture in no way reasons in accordance with our life in Christ. It is the whisper of death that is of a piece with the first lying whispers in the Garden.

Some time back I ran across an interview with Tom Holland, a non-Christian historian, who readily admits that our civilization is rooted in Christianity and is in great danger of losing that grounding. It is deeply honest and worth a listen if you're interested. We often take for granted the stability of the culture (at least this was once the case). Today, the case for cultural change is not being driven by rebellious, seditious groups, but by the most powerful political, social, and corporate structures themselves. Not since the Protestant Reformation has such a sea-change been marketed from the "top down."

I take consolation from two thoughts (and a few others). The Scriptures have this:

*Surely men of low degree are a vapor,
Men of high degree are a lie;
If they are weighed on the scales,
They are altogether lighter than vapor. (Psalm 62:9)*

And, famously, this:

*The voice said, "Cry out!"
And he said, "What shall I cry?"
"All flesh is grass,
And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever." (Isaiah 40:6–8)*

The life of God given to us in the Church abides forever. It is heard in His word. It is written in every rock and tree, every element and molecule of our body.

My prayer, "O Breath of God, blow in our world. Reveal your life in our lives and save us!"

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[Featured](#): "The Crucifixion," by Giotto; painted ca. 1320-1325.

