

Saints of August - St. John Vianney, Patron of Parish Priest Revenge of the Black Toad and Miser of Souls by Fr. Roger Landry

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"I'm a liar. Do you believe me?"

That mind-twisting statement, said to me humorously by a high school teacher, is germane to whether we can consider credible anything the devil says. Can the one whom Jesus called "a liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44) ever tell the truth?

It seems from the Gospel that not everything that the devil and his cohorts say is false. We know that various demons publicly confessed Jesus as the "holy one of God" and "Son of God" (Lk 4:34, 4:41; Mt 8:29). We also see how the devil, in tempting Jesus in the desert, would take truths out of context and misapply them toward his evil ends. From this evidence, I think a general rule of thumb would be that the devil may say something true, but we should always be aware that he will also try to manipulate such truths against God and us.

This discussion is relevant to evaluating what the evil one said to St. John Vianney when the priest encountered him in people who were possessed. Because of his extensive experience with the devil that we've been describing the past three weeks, Vianney had been given faculties by his bishop to perform exorcisms. He in fact did several. The details of his exorcisms are of obvious interest to present-day exorcists — that he did them at the foot of the altar, used relics of the saints, and employed particular prayers — but I think of far greater interest to those of us who are not exorcists is what we can learn about the Curse of Ars, the priesthood and the Christian life from what the devil divulged during these rites of liberation. If what the devil or demons said was true, then we can learn quite a bit.

The first thing we grasp is the incredible importance of even one priest like the Curse of Ars. During the exorcism of a possessed woman, the devil howled, "If there were three like you on earth, my kingdom would be destroyed. You have taken more than 80,000 souls from me."

Such a declaration explains why the devil spent so much time trying to thwart the sleep of St. John Vianney.

While it's certainly possible that the devil was lying or exaggerating, such a statement, if true, should inspire every priest and provide much for bishops and the whole Church to consider.

Imagine if there were three priests in the whole world today who responded to God's graces the way St. John Vianney did, or if one priest per country or one per diocese did: the devil is divulging that he would be totally defeated. This is something that needs to be pondered. So does the corollary: the devil is essentially saying that he fears a few priests like the Curse of Ars scattered through the world more than he does all the other priests of the world combined!

This leads to some challenging questions: Could it therefore be possible that the world would be better off having just three priests like St. John Vianney than the 440,000 priests alive today who, however pious, fail to correspond to God with the totality of the Curse of Ars? Could it be that the true work of the Gospel would be more effectively accomplished in a diocese by just one priest like St. John Vianney than by hundreds who are merely good? Are we producing in our seminaries and continuing formation programs priests like the Curse of Ars who truly frighten the devil, or are we merely sending out an army of solid ones who collectively do not scare him nearly as much?

In another exchange between Fr. Vianney and the devil, which occurred in 1840 when a woman who was not known to be possessed came to confession, we learn — at least potentially — other important truths.

This possessed woman had remained silent in the confessional for quite some time, as Fr. Vianney repeatedly encouraged her to begin confessing her sins. Finally, an infernal voice said to him loudly from the other side of the screen, "I have committed only one sin, and I share its beautiful fruit with all those who wish for it. Raise your hand and absolve me." The one sin, of course, was the sin of disobedience to God, which the devil seeks to share with everyone who sins. Satan went on to say, "It happens at times that you do raise [your hand] for me [in absolution], for I am often close to you in the confessional."

Later in the conversation the evil one developed the point. "You actually work for me from time to time.

You think your people are well disposed but they are not. Why do you examine the conscience of your penitents? What is the use of so many questions? Isn't the one I have them make enough? It is I who make their examinations for them. You think you convert them all: you are mistaken! It lasts for a moment, but I catch up with them afterwards."

The devil here stressed that even after penitents have determined to go confession, he tries to steer them away from being properly disposed for a valid absolution. He mentioned that he often tries to guide their examinations, to get them to make superficial reviews of their conscience or to get them to hide particular sins. That's why he hated the questions the Curse of Ars would ask in the confessional to assist penitents to make an integral confession. He also stressed that after the confession, he doesn't give up, but tries to recapture those he has lost.

There's a lot for all of us to learn here.

St. John Vianney, after hearing about the "one sin," spoke in Latin to the woman, to determine if it were truly the devil on the other side. "Tu, quis es?," he said, Latin for "Who are you?" The devil replied, "magister caput," or "the master, the head." Then the devil launched into a bunch of insults and complaints in French.

"You ugly black toad, how you torment me!" Black toad was the way the devil referred to priests. "You are always talking about going away. Why don't you? So many others retired to rest! Why don't you do like them? You have certainly worked enough.

"There are black toads that torture me less than you. I shall certainly get you. I have defeated those who were stronger than you. Without that [blasphemous term to refer to our Lady] who is up above, we should have you for certain; but she protects you, together with that great dragon [St. Michael] who is at the door of your church

"Why do you get up so early? You disobey purple robe [the bishop], who ordered you to take care of yourself. Why do you preach so simply? That always makes you pass for an ignorant man. Why do you not preach as a great man, as they do in the towns? How I delight in those great sermons that do no harm to anyone, but leave the people to live in their own way to do what they like.

"You are a miser of souls. You snatch as many as you can away from me! But I shall try hard to get them back."

With this diabolical diatribe, Satan highlights his priorities in St. John Vianney's case: to get him to retire, to detach him from devotion to the Blessed Virgin and to St. Michael, to persuade him to take it easier and sleep a little later, to preach eloquently rather than with a clear and direct message of conversion and holiness, and to mitigate his "greed" for the salvation of souls.

There's much for all of us to learn here from what the devil hates.

But this information should be particularly useful to those priests whom God is calling to learn from St. John Vianney how to become priests whom the devil really fears — the one, three or many who, according to the devil, will destroy his kingdom and truly help make Christ's kingdom come.