

Chapter 29

The truth of our faith becomes a matter of ridicule among the infidels if any Catholic, not gifted with the necessary scientific learning, presents as dogma what scientific scrutiny shows to be false.

—Thomas Aquinas

House of the Archbishop Arazola

Rome

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Daniel and Mark rose from the archbishop’s kitchen table to greet Father David Stempora. Mark hadn’t expected the priest’s sweat-stained cowboy hat—or his confident grip.

“So, uh, you’re from Arizona, right?”

“Texas, actually . . . and you’re from Chi-town. I had a good buddy I hunted with who lived in Evanston. Had this place north of the cheddar curtain his father’s buddies made into a reserve—just northwest of Hebron, if I remember correctly.”

“No shit. A few years back, I used to shoot black powder up there. About two miles west of the Alpine ski hill.” Mark smiled. “You drink beer?” He grabbed two from the fridge. “These guys are winos.”

“No thanks. Quit when I was young.” He laughed. “That’s how I keep my girlish figure.”

They retreated to Mikel’s small, brightly lit living room. Electing not to sit on the couch,

Mark took a seat on the floor while Mikel sat in his reading chair with Daniel and Father Stempora taking the slightly tattered couch. The curtainless south wall consisted of aluminum framed windows in need of proper washing.

Mikel opened. “I asked David here to help us get a better understanding of the varied aspects of demonic influence because, in many instances, it can be difficult to differentiate between it and mental health issues.” He turned to Daniel. “That said, I haven’t told David much about your experience in the Basque territories.”

Daniel sat up a little straighter. “What would you like to know? I mean, how should I begin?”

“First off, I think we should start with why *you* thought the guy was influenced,” Father David Stempora began. “Then we can discuss the particulars of the incident.”

Mark saw Daniel was feeling awkward, so he took the lead. “I got a question before we get into it. Why the word influenced? I mean, everybody is influenced by evil things, but not everybody’s will gets hijacked. People do stupid shit for many reasons.”

Mikel smiled. “Mark here is a homicide detective, so he may have some opinion on the matter.”

“That he might.” Father Stempora nodded. “Okay, first off, I’d have to say that full possession requiring exorcism is extremely rare. That said, lesser forms of possession, still a rarity, have become more common over the past fifteen years. In these lesser instances, a deliverance process is used for demonic oppression or obsession when a person pursues the occult, and demonic forces answer the call. These pursuits are forms of spiritism, the occult, Wicca, New Age, and basically the practice of any magic—white, black, or green. Add to this list any divination devices such as Tarot cards, Ouija boards, psychic readings, astrological

divination, etcetera.”

Mark frowned. “Are you saying that anybody who uses these things is calling on demonic forces? I find that a little hard to swallow.”

“No, that’s not quite right. Satan is determined to lead people away from the truth about God. The occult is driven by people who would either deny the Lord or refute his kingdom by its very nature. God allows two sources of spiritual power to affect humans, and Satan is the other. Satan uses the occult to deceive, to draw people into a false reality. Interestingly, people who use the occult show an aversion to scripture and become irritated when it’s quoted. This distaste is an action of the spirit and not the brain.”

“So just having your palm read can expose you to demonic attack? Anybody else got a problem with this?” Mark looked over at Daniel.

“Not really.” Daniel shrugged, glad that the investigator in Mark was taking the lead in this conversation. Needing to hear Mark’s prospective analysis on the spiritual aspects of his faith, he would gently steer Mark, so the dialectic exchange did not get off-topic. “I didn’t think he meant that the action in itself is the problem. Is that right, Father?”

“That’s right,” Father Stempora elaborated. “The issue is one of intent. If someone reads your palm, and you think of it as a novelty, then you take it for what it is to you. But suppose you believe the divination could be true. In that case, you show yourself ready to accept the deception by believing, and now we have action.”

“Meaning spiritual involvement,” Mikel clarified. Sensing the change in Daniel, he directed his comments at Mark.

“Yes.” Stempora nodded, “I must note here that in all aspects of spiritual influence—whether possession, oppression, or obsession—they can only directly affect the body, including

the brain. The soul cannot be bound except by deliberate choice. When I say mind, I refer to the combination of the body/brain and the soul/intellect. Satan attacks the intellect.”

Mark looked around as though he had just been handed a chocolate-covered kitten. “Then intellect isn’t from the brain?”

Stempora laughed. “I know. Right? But hear me out, and I’ll try not to use too broad a brush. Humans are basically dualistic in nature: material and spiritual. Let us consider the carnal or physical aspect first. Your body is made to receive and analyze worldly events that report to you through the senses. Some are interpreted—many are not. When discussing autonomic action—actions that have an innate, biologically programmed response—we typically refer to a bodily action/reaction designed for defense or preservation because most voluntary actions are derived from cognition. Many are necessary for teaching via non-verbal communication, like aping or a physical expression we associate with a hermeneutic interpretation like a particular shoulder shrug or a meaningful tilt of the head.

“When we discuss intellect, we’re not talking about something like fight/flight, which is an autonomic response, or even mimicry, which is a developmental response. I’m addressing the voluntary cognitive actions that require judgment, and judgment is not just a responsive action—it flows from moral reasoning. For instance, John sees a drowning kitten and thinks, ‘I need to save this kitten.’ Or maybe he thinks, ‘I need this kitten for a deadly experiment.’ The intent modifies the good/bad aspect of the action. Studies show that moral reasoning is distinct from the knowledge gleaned from society. Children as early as eighteen months have demonstrated a capacity for moral reasoning without any hierarchical influence.”

Mark nodded. “So, you’re saying the mind is in charge of moral reasoning, and the body reports, what, the events that happen?”

“Yes, moral reasoning stems from the soul, the spiritual side. When spirits decide to influence a human, the human must be able to reason. God doesn’t negate our free will, nor does he allow others to do so. It’s interesting to note the effect of intent on our decision-making, like addiction to a damaging substance or even remaining in an abusive relationship. There’s a lot more to it than the obvious beneficial aspects. Free will has consequences.”

“When you say free will, aren’t you just talking about choices or options?” Mark pressed. “Because we can limit a person’s options by jailing them—which is the whole point.”

“Yes,” Mikel added, “free will deals with fate, or to be more accurate, the absence of fate—the ability to respond with our own discretion. Free will also truncates our free agency, like acting out what we feel we should do instead of what we can do. Again, the body can be bound to functions that occur without our discretion or choice—the spirit cannot. It is also my understanding that demonic activity can only affect the body through the spirit.”

“Where do you guys get all this knowledge about the demonic or even the existence of Satan? I mean, how do you . . .”

“In the New Testament,” Mikel replied, “Satan’s existence is strongly emphasized. Every single New Testament writer either refers to Satan or the devil. Of the twenty-seven New Testament books, nineteen mentions the devil by name, and twenty-three mention the devil or demons by some name. Christ speaks of Satan twenty-five times, so biblically, the existence of Satan is pretty much a settled issue.”

“Yes, and not an allegorical one, like the Book of Job is thought to be.” Father Stempora added. “Satan is, for all intents and purposes, a *personal being* with all the attendant actions of will that are required to meet his conceived purpose. The dynamics are different in today’s world than in Job’s time, where Satan plays the role of the accuser of humankind before God. The new

covenant with God is through Jesus Christ, and this is a covenant not based upon works but based upon faith. Satan knows this and plays the tempter to attack the foundation of faith by offering other power options such as mysticism and the illusion of having power in the spirit world—mainly through the occult. It’s as though he wants to bring works back into the game.”

“Why works?” Mark asked. “Are you talking about good deeds, just action, Aristotelian virtue? Are these the things Satan wants to eliminate, the ability to live a good life?”

“Not necessarily. I mean, how do you define living well? It depends on who you serve.” Father Stempora furrowed his brow, “but that’s a part of it. Satan wants people to remain chained to sin ‘til they think they’re beyond redemption due to some perceived unforgivable action. Therefore, they rebel by denying the sovereignty of God, for truly, through God, nothing is impossible. The works I’m referring to are magical deeds and mystical action, and as I understand it, many theists believe that God *is the creation*, so one can compel the power of God using command or ritual to control the ‘great spirit.’ Others go so far as to claim that they’re becoming God or co-creating their reality with an undefined, unknowable divine entity. But God is not in the creation; he is the Creator.”

Daniel shook his head. “I never understood that. If you were truly a part of God, how could you not know it? I mean no disrespect here, but having a relationship with God is very different from being God—or thinking that somehow you create the reality unfolding before you.”

“Truly.” Mikel smiled at the thought. “The idea stems again from our dualistic nature of material and spirit.” Mikel looked down at his hands. “Basically, all religions have this element. The Hindus believe in polarity, and the Yin/Yang duality serves as equal counterforces. They claim that human desire throws this polarity, this Karmic balance, out of wack. The Hellenists,

like Aristotle, believed that desire was the root of human evil. Stoicism attempts to view all things objectively without emotion—without desire. It’s interesting because desire is a function of free will. Without that, why would one strive for accomplishment, or love, for that matter? Desire lies at the heart of awareness. Hindus hold that if one could somehow eliminate all desire, then one would fully realize their god status. Understand, though, they do not see God as we do. God, to them, it’s a collective of spirits that are devoid of desire. Therefore, when told God wants a relationship with them, they don’t think this is possible. Such a god is very different from the God of the Bible.”

Mark circled back. “You think it’s our free will that makes us aware.”

“Is it through reason that we see Truth?” Mikel countered. “Or is it from our ability to *perceive* Truth that we know reason? The ability to choose between truth and falsehood is discernment. Certainly, we can use logic in discernment, but ultimately our perceptions guide us because we cannot know all of the elements involved. Like math, logic can only answer the elements put into the equation. Reason resolves; it does not discern. Science cannot verify the existence of the soul, so its study is referred to as metaphysics. It’s an Aristotelian concept of the study of nonphysical things or, more precisely, things that don’t change.”

“Things that don’t change,” Mark repeated. “You mean things that don’t evolve. Doesn’t the word evolution just mean change?”

“That’s right,” Stempora nodded. “Spirit is eternal, immutable, impervious to change, and it’s interminable, everlasting in its original form. The soul is growing, evolving from the corruption of the flesh where desire is focused on the self. These things are defined by their ontological aspects, meaning to study the defining characteristics of a thing—including purpose. Purpose is important because, without it, how can worth be judged? Science has shown us that

all things exist for a reason—the creation is synergistic in nature.”

“Okay. I don’t quite know what all that means, but I think you’re talking about awareness. How would *you* define that?” Mark asked. “I’ve heard it explained as an all-or-nothing concept. I know that I’m aware of you, but it kind of ends there. I can’t know for sure if you’re aware of me because all events happening to me are within my awareness. I think, therefore I am.”

Mikel held up an index finger. “Yes, but try another approach. If you’re a part of existence and can’t separate from it, then you could never doubt it, right? That’s kind of what you’re saying. But if you can doubt a thing, you must be aware that its existence is separate from you.

“Simply put, doubt can only come from an observation separate from the influences of the observed thing. Descartes first doubts his existence and then thinks about his nature outside of existence. I doubt, therefore I think. I think, therefore I am.”

“Okay.” Mark sat back. “So if the body and brain are part of material existence but the soul is not, what aspect does the thinking?”

“Let’s imagine a love-professing AI automaton. When we say AI thinks, it’s actually executing a program, a designed pre-established code, literally information on how to act. It’s not intelligent because it can’t doubt the programming and decide not to act. It can only carry it out. It has no choice. Now you, however, doubt that the thing loves you because you’re aware of its nature, that it’s programmed. All life is based on information, not book information, but chemically stored in DNA. This information coordinates the materials that comprise life into a biological mechanism that acts to the information specifically. Unlike computers, the inhabiting soul directs our mechanism on the macro-level. When we shoot an arrow, we direct the body

through our will. The millions of nerve/muscle responses act without our direct influence, carrying out pre-established code. If my doubt of hitting a target diminishes through practice, I hit it more often than before. What changed?"

"It's the soul, then, that doubts," Mark circled back, "not the brain that reports it. I am because I can doubt, and I can question the truth of it, and therefore, it's proof that I can think—Descartes again."

"It's the doubting of God that sets us apart from Him," Mikel clarified. "That's what Satan is after, for doubt is a lack of faith—skeptical, unconvinced. But let's be careful here. It doesn't mean we don't think. When we doubt, we're processing, perceiving, and not just reacting—we're discerning. Remember that reaction is simply an action responding to an event. That action can come with or without a discernable choice. That's the science part of metaphysics."

"In my line," Father Stempora offered. "We measure spiritual influence by response or reaction. Behaving in a highly improbable manner, like speaking in a language previously unknown to the person or knowing something the person couldn't possibly know. I define awareness as the ability to question meaning, not just doubting what's being observed. God wants us to have faith, but not blind faith, which is not really faith in the first place. Faith without discernment is pointless."

"So where is this construct of truth that doesn't change which you alluded to before?" Mark asked, "Is it like that dude Plato says in his argument on forms? Things exist but not as we perceive them, so the truth of a thing remains unrealized because of our limited or self-tailored perception—shadows on the wall—we decide what has purpose."

"No, because that cycles back to co-creation. Ultimately, truth lies in the static nature of

God,” Stempora answered, “God is truth, and that truth is unchanging. To question the validity of that truth is to doubt it. We do this because we’re distinct from God. But remember, God is knowable, so he reveals to us what our purpose is.”

“You said that proof we’re separate from God is based on our ability to question the existence of God. Okay, what about these spirits? They seem to have access to humans without knowledge or doubt. How does that work?”

Mikel furrowed his brow before turning to the priest from Texas. “Father Stempora?”

“I’m not sure what Mark is referring to.” Stempora paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. “The apostle Paul, who’s been to the spiritual realm, tells us that a battle is being waged there. He also relates a different realm separate from the physical world or visible universe. Describing the spiritual, he wrote: ‘the lord of the dominion of the air, the spirit which is now at work in the sons of disobedience.’ Then, Paul tells us that our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the powers of this dark world *and* against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm. Evil is not the absence of good. It’s the corruption of truth—a distortion.

“The New Testament tells us to ‘Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.’ Although Satan was defeated by Jesus Christ’s work on the cross, the day of reckoning has yet to come. The tempter still roams free. Again, God has given us free will, and he will not allow that will to be vanquished. Neither Satan nor his demons can possess anybody against their will. I want to add that in the case of children, it appears that through their parent’s actions, or lack thereof, demons can influence them before they are fully cognizant. Satan warps reason. But Satan is still a created being, and under the full control of God, so we assume possession to be a voluntary condition. The Bible warns us to avoid dabbling in the occult, for this is the realm of demons. Many demonic

possessions occur through the worship of idols: money, false gods, spiritualism. These are gateways that can open one to demonic influence.”

Mark asked. “Once possessed, can the individual rid themselves of the demonic influence? Or does it take a priest to rid them?”

“First off, no priest has the power to expel any demons; only Christ has that ability. By calling on the Lord, a priest can ask for his intervention, but they must believe in him when they invoke the name of Jesus the Christ. Some nonbelieving Jewish men witnessed Paul expelling demons in Jesus’s name in the Book of Acts, so they tried it. Invoking Christ’s name, they ordered an unclean spirit to leave a person, throwing in Paul’s name just to be on the safe side. Well, the spirit replied, ‘Jesus, I know, and I know of Paul, but who are you?’ Then the possessed man jumped up and beat them until they fled the house naked and bleeding.

“There were some demons that even the apostles had trouble driving out. In Mark 9:29, Jesus tells them they need prayer to expel a particular type of demon. In the same account found in Matthew 7:21, it was their lack of faith, ‘If you have faith as large as a grain of mustard, you will say to this mountain: move from here to there, and it will move.’ So through prayer, we can increase our faith. This is why prayer is the only effective weapon believing exorcists can use. Otherwise, it’s just another useless magical incantation. What great power can mankind possess against beings in the spiritual realm? This is one of the grave dangers for New Age practitioners: they invite the spirit realm and open themselves to spiritual influence, and because belief shapes our will, many people are misled and become open to demonic influences.”

“Can a person rid themselves of a demon?” Daniel asked. “I think that’s where Mark was going with his question.”

“I’m not sure,” Stempora answered. “By their nature, demons are deceivers, confuters of

truth. They try to confuse people about what's true. The Church has been given authority by Christ to drive out demons. However, people that have successfully regained their 'right mind' through deliverance can still have trouble and hear voices. Only now, they're no longer as willing to listen. The Bible states clearly, 'Submit to God and the devil will flee from you.'

"This clone that attacked Daniel." Mark's voice hardened. "Was he possessed or just some kind of whack job?"

"I think Mark is indelicately asking the difference between mental illness and influence." Daniel shot a glance at Mark. "You must forgive his American penchant for bluntness," he added with a wink.

Father Stempora laughed. "You should visit Texas sometime. We can use a few tells to separate possession from mental illness. A common misconception is that demons cause illness. Take that young boy in the New Testament that had epileptic seizures. Was this epilepsy or a demon using symptoms of the disease? The Book tells us that the boy was healed when the demon was cast out. However, it's clear in the Bible that not all people with sicknesses had demons since they were healed right alongside the possessed people. So we can surmise that demons can afflict someone with the symptoms of illness, but it might be different from an actual illness of the body. Remember that demons are *deceivers*, but there are some tells."

"Such as?" Mark asked.

"Well, under demonic influence, a person's voice can change . . . exorcists describe a demonic growl that seems consistent from one case to another, and as I said earlier, some victims exhibit the sudden ability to speak in a foreign language they previously didn't know."

"Like speaking in tongues?" Daniel asked.

"Yes, but tongues are used in the act of praising God, so no. It is like speaking in Russian

using a dialect found thirty miles northeast of Kursk, and it can be that specific. Again, it's a knowledge they could not have come upon naturally."

"Like the Spirit of Divination in the servant girl found in the book of Acts," Mikel offered.

"Yes, exactly. Or personal knowledge of a past event or person that the influenced person could never have known about. Exorcists report patients that had knowledge of their past mistakes and used that as an accusation of their unworthiness to expel them—which, ironically, is accurate."

"What about flying furniture or sudden cold? You know, like in the movie." Mark made spooky sounds while waving his hands about. He couldn't help himself.

Stempora laughed. "Yes, I get that question a lot, and yes, there is some of that. Many people have reported Ouija boards that suddenly levitate and Scrabble games that spell out sentences during a séance."

Mark's performance irritated Daniel. He couldn't see the humor in the subject because a possessed clone *had* tried to kill him, after all. "What about my experience with John Asker?"

"I'm not familiar with the name." Stempora turned to Mikel.

"I haven't revealed anything to Father Stempora." Mikel turned to Daniel. "I thought it best if it was related firsthand."

Daniel told the story of John Asker, from his first appearance at the church to the confrontation that had led to his defenestration from Daniel's office. "What about it, Father? Do you think this guy was possessed?"

"Without examining the person, it's hard to be sure, but yes, based on the reactions you described, I would say there's a strong indication. Asker's plea for help in the confessional and

later mocking our Lord is consistent with the conflict in personality commonly found in possession. Demons hate anything related to God's sovereignty with a passion and resist even entering churches. They will react with physical pain when touched by Holy Water or even the Bible."

"What about identifying itself with the word legion?" Mark asked.

"Yes, that's true, but like you pointed out, that could just be a TV reference. Much has been made of that story about the possessed man Christ encountered in the region of the Gerasenes so that by itself would not be definitive proof. It's important to understand that these may only be indicators, albeit strong ones. Many traits are too readily linked to demonic possession. Psychosomatic delusions, dissociative identity disorders, paranoia, and other mental illnesses could cause similar symptoms—it's just not that well understood."

"The clone at the state ward exhibited none of those aspects." Mark stood. "In fact, the psychiatrist described it as a walking catatonic."

"What's a walking catatonic? I've never heard of that diagnosis, Detective. Are you sure that's what he said?"

After Mark presented the psych ward's file of the rogue clone, Stempora's eyes darted across each page as he thumbed through the contents. "Inability to communicate . . . subject does not seem cognizant . . . does not appear to be self-aware. What the heck are they talking about here? Your cat?" He looked up, clearly skeptical.

"Nah, but funny you should say that. The doc who talked with me said that the clone reminded him of his cat. Now, can these demons you've been speaking about do that to a person?"

"No, that's the whole point as I understand it. Spirits can't act in this material world

because they're not of it—they can only work through human agency. That's why they don't just take over the mentally disabled or the infirm. They attack a person's judgment trying to confuse or distort their will and bend them to a purpose. So if these clones are truly non-sentient, then like a child, they would be open to demonic attack."

"You said that a demon cannot animate an unwilling person or force them to act against their will." Mark looked questioningly. "I mean, other than falsely convincing them to take a course of action."

"Nor an animal, it would appear. In possession, the victim has to allow it."

"Back to the Gerasenes incident," Mark interjected. "Didn't the demons leap into a passel of hogs?"

"Yes, but the pigs killed themselves immediately, so it's apparent that the demons could not prevent this from happening."

"There's only one thing I want to know." Mark glanced at Daniel. "Is Satan after my friend?"

"I cannot speak to that, but if Daniel wears the armor of God . . ." Stempora shrugged. "Satan cannot defeat that."

"Yeah, well, that's in the spiritual realm. What about some other bastard's will?"