

**God is saving me and
delivering me from all evil**

Foreword

There are questions that are frequently addressed to priests. Father Duarte Sousa Lara has gathered and condensed them, in the present book, to 40 questions, for which he gave the respective answers, given at the light of Sacred Scripture, Church's Magisterium, sound theology and his own experience of exorcist priest of the Catholic Church, committed for many years to this ministry which he performs with seriousness and competence.

The faithful will find, therefore, an adequate answer to each question, which each catholic should know so as to be able to offer it to others, distinguishing the true faith from the «spiritualities» – characterized by superstition, magic, esotericism – and from the devastating trends of our time: New Age, pseudo-religiousness, spiritism, satanism...

May the reading of this text be, for many, an occasion of clarification, favouring their discernment in the midst of the confusion of which the devil is the inspiration and the master, with the goal of straying the souls from the path of righteousness.

May the Virgin Mary guide us, her children, to the encounter and union with Christ, her Son, true God and Lord of the universe, the One that gives man the truth-founded freedom, the only true Saviour, ultimate end of the whole accomplished existence.

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Introduction

God the Father, in His infinite mercy, has sent His dearly beloved Son «full of grace and truth» (John 1, 14) to save us, through His cross, from the sin that enslaves and destroys us, from sins' instigator – the devil – and from the bitter consequences of sin, of which the eternal death of hell and temporal death stand out. This salvation that the Father offers us in the mystery of the dead and resurrected Christ is a pure gift of His goodness and precedes any merit on our part. We access it through faith and the sacraments. It has decisive moments, such as the day of our Baptism, but will only fully take place once Jesus returns and, after having definitely defeated death, fully establishes His Kingdom of love and peace. God saves me and delivers me from all evil!

These 40 brief questions about the devil, the exorcisms and prayers of deliverance are the fruit of my journey and personal reflections in the last 16 years. In 1998, still a young seminarian, I had the grace of beginning to accompany Fr Gabriele Amorth in many exorcisms. It was a very enriching experience, which lasted 10 years and struck me profoundly.

In 2008, the year I settled back in Portugal, my bishop nominated me as an exorcist and I can count already with six years of intense service to the People of God in this ministry.

The questions I try to answer to are many of those that I am faced with in the retreats and gatherings to which I am invited to participate. I have tried to give them short, clear and theologically-sound answers, from a catechetical perspective while simultaneously mindful of the pagan environment nowadays Christians live in.

At the end, in attachment, I have included a prayer of deliverance that I use very often and that I have made based on another one composed by Fr Gabriele Amorth. It has an efficacy similar to that of an exorcism. Straight after this useful prayer of deliverance, I have also included, in attachment, a short treatise concerning the moral virtue of religion that I have written a few years ago and that I believe will integrate and put into context the statements that I present throughout the 40 questions of this book.

May these brief reflections help us to follow Jesus Christ ever more faithfully, to come to know better the demands of His Word and to unmask with greater clarity all the seductive suggestions of the «father of lies» (John 8, 44).

1. Do demons exist?

Yes, they do exist. «The existence of the spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Sacred Scripture usually calls “angels” is a truth of faith»¹. Some of those angels, created good by God, under the leadership of Satan, also referred to as Devil, «radically and irrevocably rejected God and His reign»², and therefore one should say that «the devil and other demons were created by God good in nature, but they themselves through themselves have become wicked»³.

2. Why do some christians deny the existence of the devil?

Some christians⁴, overwhelmed by the scientific achievements of the last centuries, have placed, erroneously, an extensive trust in the method of the experimental sciences and have ended up denying realities that, by their nature, cannot be studied as empirical knowledge, such as the purely spiritual beings whom we call angels.

3. Can Satan cause any evil he wants?

No. «The power of Satan is, nonetheless, not infinite. He is only a creature, powerful from the fact that he is pure spirit»⁵, that is an angel that, like every angel, «surpass in perfection all visible creatures»⁶.

4. What is the greatest evil that demons can cause?

Demons «try to associate man in their revolt against God »⁷, by inducing man into mortal sin, which «results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell»⁸.

5. With what sins does the devil take more people into hell?

God alone knows. In our culture, however, due to their diffusion, two especially grave vices stand out: 1) Lust, idolatry of sexual pleasure, in all its forms (contraception, masturbation, adultery, pre-matrimonial relations, relations between people of the same sex, etc.), that destroy the human capability of loving, that is the self-offering to God and to

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 328.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 392.

³ Fourth Council of Latran, Canon 1, *De Fide Catholica*, DH 800.

⁴ Cf. R. Bultmann, *Nuovo Testamento e Mitologia. Il Manifesto della Demitizzazione*, Brescia, 1970, pp. 109-110: «The faith regarding the existence of spirits and demons has been overwhelmed by the knowledge regarding the forces and laws of nature. [...] One cannot use electric light and radio, make use of modern medical or chemical instruments in case of disease, and then believe in the world of spirits and miracles of the New Testament» [our translation].

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 395.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 330.

⁷ Preface, *Roman Ritual. Rite of Exorcisms*.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1861.

others⁹; 2) The superstition, with which we divinize some creature or created force, falling into idolatry¹⁰, divination¹¹ or magic¹². Through these sins, the devil corrupts our relationship with God¹³.

6. How does one tell if a certain behavior is superstitious or not?

If, in a certain behavior, «natural things are employed simply for the purpose of causing certain effects such as they are thought to have the natural power of producing, then [in that behavior] there is nothing superstitious or unlawful. But if in addition there be employed certain characters, words, or any other vain observances which clearly have no efficacy by nature, [that behavior] will be superstitious and unlawful»¹⁴.

7. Can a christian resort to mediums, witch doctors, wizards or spiritual centers to ask for help?

Never, because «all divination results from the demons' operation»¹⁵ and it is by the power of «angels that transgressed [that] magic arts have whatever power they have»¹⁶. In Sacred Scripture God explicitly forbids any form of divination or magic: «Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God» (Lev 19, 31). «When you come into the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD; and because of these abominable practices the LORD your God is driving them out before you»

⁹ Blessed Jacinta Marto said, just before she died: « The sins that lead more souls into hell are the sins of the flesh» (J. M. De Marchi, *Era Uma Senhora mais Brilhante Que o Sol*, 17.^a ed., Fatima, Editora Missões Consolata, 2000, p. 267) [our translation].

¹⁰ Cf. Exod 20, 2-6: «I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments».

¹¹ Cf. Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (Saint), *Theologia Moralis*, Rome, Tipografia Vaticana, 1905, tom. 1, lib. 3, tract. 1, cap. 1, dub. 2, n.5: «Divination happens when someone invokes the tacit or explicit help of demons with the goal of knowing contingent (not necessary) future things or occult things that one cannot naturally know» [our translation].

¹² Cf. Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (Saint), *Theologia Moralis*, Rome, Tipografia Vaticana, 1905, tom. 1, lib. 3, tract. 1, cap. 1, dub. 4, n.15: «Magic, like divination, is by nature (*ex genere suo*) a mortal sin; because it accredits divine honours to creatures, expecting from them what one should only hope from God, and also because one tries to make a pact with demons» [our translation].

¹³ Cf. Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (Saint), *Theologia Moralis*, Rome, Tipografia Vaticana, 1905, tom. 1, lib. 3, tract. 1, cap. 1, dub. 1, n.1: «Superstition is the falsification of religion, or a vicious cult» [our translation].

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 96, a.2, ad1.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 95, a.2, c.; cf. Augustine of Hippo (Saint), *De Divinatione Daemonum Liber Unus*, PL 40.

¹⁶ Augustine of Hippo (Saint), *De Trinitate*, 3, 7, 12.

(Deut 18, 9-12). «A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned with stones, their blood shall be upon them» (Lev 20, 27)¹⁷.

8. What forms of divination exist?

There are many, which can be grouped into two big types: «A first type is that form of divination in which one makes an invocation or explicit pact with the devil – commonly known as spiritualism (*necromantia*) – and that happens when the devil instructs through means of soothsayers, [...] under the appearance of people, dead or alive; or by means of other signs in the air, in the water, in the fire or in mirrors. The other form of divination is that where an invocation or a pact merely tacit [with the devil] exists, also known as interpretative divination, in which, from the lines of the body, the voice, the sounds of birds and similar things, on which the devil often interferes, one seeks a knowledge for which such things are not proportional»¹⁸.

9. Nowadays, what is the position of the Catholic Church?

It has been the same for 2000 years. The *Catechism* states: «All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to "unveil" the future (cf. Deut 18, 10; Jer 29, 8). Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers»¹⁹. «All practices of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others - even if this were for the sake of restoring their health - are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion. These practices are even more to be condemned when accompanied by the intention of harming someone, or when they have recourse to the intervention of demons»²⁰.

¹⁷ Cf. Also, for example: «for they are demonic spirits, performing signs» (Rev 16, 14), «Satan disguises himself as an angel of light» (2 Cor 11, 14), «Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all» (Acts 19, 18-19), «Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God» (Gal 5, 19-21), «But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death» (Rev 21, 8).

¹⁸ Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (Saint), *Theologia Moralis*, Rome, Tipografia Vaticana, 1905, tom. 1, lib. 3, tract. 1, cap. 1, dub. 2, n.º 6 [our translation].

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2116.

²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2117.

10. Being so, can't a christian resort to magic to achieve good things, such as the healing of an illness, the reestablishment of peace in a matrimony, to find a job or to have a child?

No, because any form of magic or divination always requires a pact with the devil and «in no way is it lawful for man to make use of the demons' help by compacts either tacit or express»²¹.

11. Can a christian use charms?

No. «Wearing charms is also reprehensible»²² because it is a form of superstition and, therefore, a sin that offends God²³.

12. Can a christian resort to astrology?

No. Astrology is a false science (pseudoscience) that is nothing else than another form of divination²⁴, through which one seeks, based on the relative position of the celestial bodies, to attain unknown information or information regarding the future, through an implicit pact with the devil. The scientific community, unanimously, does not recognize the scientific character of astrology.

13. Can a christian resort to Tarot?

No. Tarot is another form of divination that seeks, through the interpretation of some special cards, to attain unknown information or information regarding the future, through an implicit pact with the devil.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 96, a.2, ad3.

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2117.

²³ Cf. 2 Macc 12, 39-42: «On the next day, as by that time it had become necessary, Judas and his men went to take up the bodies of the fallen and to bring them back to lie with their kinsmen in the sepulchers of their fathers. Then under the tunic of every one of the dead they found sacred tokens of the idols of Jam'nia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. And it became clear to all that this was why these men had fallen. So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous Judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; and they turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out. And the noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen».

²⁴ Cf. Isa 47, 12-15: «Steadfast in your enchantments and your many sorceries, with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you may be able to succeed, perhaps you may inspire terror. You are wearied with your many counsels; let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons predict what shall befall you. Behold, they are like stubble, the fire consumes them; they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. No coal for warming oneself is this, no fire to sit before! Such to you are those with whom you have labored, who have trafficked with you from your youth; they wonder about each in his own direction; there is no one to save you».

14. Can a christian practice *reiki*?

No. *Reiki* is an alternative «medicine»²⁵, from an oriental-culture inspiration, in which one seeks, through the imposition of the hands and the invocation of certain «spiritual forces», to heal illnesses and relief human suffering. The efficacy of *reiki* therapies has still not been explained and demonstrated at a scientific level. Actually, they are nothing else than a form of white magic²⁶. Many people who practice *reiki* end up becoming possessed by the devil.

15. Can a Christian practice yoga?

No. The set of beliefs of yoga is inseparable of Hinduism. Yoga, which literally means «to unite», seeks to unite man to the impersonal divinity (enlightenment) through specific rites and invocations (uttering of mantras) to which a «spiritual» efficacy is credited. It is not just about certain techniques of relaxation, like many think – they are actually gestures laden with spiritual meanings that set people apart from the truth and the grace that Jesus²⁷ brought to us, and open our hearts to demonic action, as it can be seen in numerous cases of exorcism.

16. Can a christian resort to acupuncture?

It is better not to. Acupuncture comes from Chinese traditional medicine and, therefore, sustains its relative efficacy resorting to a point of view on divinity, mankind and world that is not compatible with Christianity (energy, chakras, meridians, etc.). More recently, some scientific research has been able to demonstrate that the needles used in acupuncture, acting on the nervous system, can, in some cases, interfere with the perception of pain and, therefore, to have a certain analgesic effect.

17. Can a christian resort to homeopathy?

I advise not to. If a christian finds himself ill, and the illness is serious, I firmly recommend to receive with faith the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and to seek medical attention. Homeopathy presents itself as another «alternative medicine» that, in reality, is nothing else than a false science (pseudoscience). Homeopathy postulates,

²⁵ *Reiki* belongs to the set of «energy therapy», among which yoga-therapy, dowsing, pranotherapy, pyramidology, shiatsu, reflexology, etc. All of them are unacceptable for a christian. Further information on these topics can be found on the catholic website of the Gruppo di Ricerca e Informazione Socioreligiosa www.gris.org.

²⁶ Cf. Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines for Evaluating Reiki as an Alternative Therapy*, March 25th, 2009; also the *website* www.religionenlibertad.com, that presents several articles and testimonies on the tricks and dangers of *reiki*, yoga and many other tricks that the devil uses in nowadays world.

²⁷ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian meditation*, October 15th, 1989. It is also worthy to read the remarkable witness of Father Joseph-Marie Verlinde, who converted from being a yoga guru to a believer in Jesus and now dedicates himself, through his *website* www.final-age.net, to unmask the diabolical tricks behind these new forms of spirituality that we so frequently find nowadays.

erroneously, that a substance that causes specific symptoms in a healthy person will cure those very same symptoms in an ill person. Even if most of the homeopathic «medication» is made starting from natural products, which is not a moral issue by itself, one needs to be very imprudent, as rather frequently in the homeopathic stores, besides its natural products, white magic and the use of charms are also presented to the public.

18. Can a christian resort to an enneagram?

It is better not to. The enneagram is a model used in studies of personality, which groups the different characters in nine (έννέα) types. From a scientific point of view, amongst scholars, there is still no consensus on its validity. From a faith point of view, it presents itself as a practice that induces into Gnosticism, that is to say, to search the salvation in knowledge and, in this line of thought, it has been openly criticized in a document by the Pontifical Council for Culture that states: «Gnosticism never completely abandoned the realm of Christianity. Instead, it has always existed side by side with Christianity, sometimes taking the shape of a philosophical movement, but more often assuming the characteristics of a religion or a para-religion in distinct, if not declared, conflict with all that is essentially Christian. An example of this can be seen in the enneagram, the nine-type tool for character analysis, which when used as a means of spiritual growth introduces an ambiguity in the doctrine and the life of the Christian faith»²⁸.

19. Can a christian belong to the Masonry?

No, a christian cannot belong to the Masonry²⁹. To embrace Masonry's vision on God and Man bears with it renouncing the baptismal promises, this means bearing with it apostasy to the catholic faith. «The faithful who enroll in Masonic associations are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion»³⁰. Masonry has explicitly been condemned by 12 popes in more than 23 pontifical documents, which makes it the most condemn organization in the history of the Church.

20. Why does the Church condemn Masonry³¹ so much?

Because Masonry is an initiatory secret society that, under the disguise of philanthropy and goodwill, promotes:

²⁸ Pontifical Council for Culture, *Jesus Christ, the bearer of the Water of Life. A Christian reflection on the "New Age"*, 1.4.

²⁹ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1374: «A person who joins an association which plots against the Church is to be punished with a just penalty; however, a person who promotes or directs an association of this kind is to be punished with an interdict».

³⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Masonic Associations*, November 26th, 1983.

³¹ A good essay on Masonry, with plenty of bibliography of masonic sources, has been written by father Paolo M. Siano, *Un Manuale per Conoscere la Massoneria*, Frigento, Casa Mariana Editrice, 2012, 630pp.

- 1) A religious and moral relativism, profoundly antidogmatic, that places reason above any divine revelation and promotes subjective anthropocentrism that ends up calling evil to good and good to evil;
- 2) Magical and idolatrous rituals, which in some cases are explicitly satanic and include profanations of the Holy Eucharist;
- 3) Esotericism, in the sense that the masonic «truths» are secrets to which one is inducted gradually and that do not belong to the public domain, but to an elite of enlightened people. It is a gnostic esotericism because, according to Masonry, it is by means of these secret «truths» that mankind self transcends, perfects, fulfills and saves itself;
- 4) A special hatred toward Jesus Christ and the Church that He founded – the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church – that has been historically noticeable on numerous occasions: French Revolution, Russian Revolution, Spanish and Mexican Civil Wars, liberal and republican revolutions in Portugal, etc.
- 5) Discriminations and unfair favouritisms. *Masons* protect and help one another with no scruples whatsoever. If needed, they lie and commit injustices, amongst many other immoral behaviors, in order to favour and help fellow *masons*.

21. How does Masonry have so much power?

Because it recruits (it can only be accessed by invitation) and sets its members, through a system of mutual help, in society's key positions, namely in politics, magistracy, diplomacy, intelligence secret services, armed forces, *media*, financial departments, show business, etc.

22. Can a christian hear any kind of music?

No. Nowadays, there is more and more music that, due to its lyrics or melody, incite to sin in various ways. Such songs are unacceptable for those who love and follow Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, the number of singers who publicly confess having made a pact with the devil and that pay him an explicit worship during shows is on the rise.

23. Is the devil the instigator of all our sins and the cause of all evils?

No. As Jesus teaches us in the parable of the sower³², sometimes we are driven into sin by the seductions of the world or by our own evil tendencies. «One cannot accuse the devil of everything that happens; in fact, at times, man acts as the devil against himself»³³.

24. Has Jesus Christ already defeated the Devil and his angels?

Yes, «the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil» (1John 3, 8). «Christ, through the Paschal mystery of His death and resurrection, “from bondage to

³² Cf. Matt 13, 3-8; Mark 4, 3-9.13-20; Luke 8, 5-8.11-15;

³³ Augustine of Hippo (Saint), *Serm.* 163/B, 5.

the devil and sin He delivered us"»³⁴. However, the Devil, though definitely defeated by Christ on the cross, still exerts his malefic action in the world and «the action is permitted by divine providence»³⁵, which can make emerge a greater good from an evil³⁶. «For a monumental struggle against the powers of darkness pervades the whole history of man. The battle was joined from the very origins of the world and will continue until the last day, as the Lord has attested»³⁷.

25. What types of actions do demons exert in the world?

«The maleficent and adverse action of the Devil and the demons affects persons, things and places, manifesting itself in various ways»³⁸.

26. What kind of natural capabilities do demons and angels have?

They have a certain power over material realities; for example, they can move objects³⁹ and have the capability to act on our senses, both exterior and interior⁴⁰.

27. Can demons operate true miracles?

No, only God can operate miracles in the true sense. Nonetheless demons, due to their natural capabilities, can operate wondrous and extraordinary things that may look like miracles to man. In fact, at times, «when the demons do anything on their own natural power, these things are called miracles not in an absolute sense, but in reference to ourselves. In this way the magicians work miracles through demons»⁴¹.

28. What is parapsychology?

It is a false science (pseudoscience) that aims to study the so called «paranormal» phenomena, such as, for example, telepathy, clairvoyance, mediumship, extracorporeal experiences and spirits, with the scientific method of experimental sciences⁴². The scientific community, unanimously, does not recognize the scientific character of the methods and results attained by parapsychology. In contrast, theology has always been able to explain,

³⁴ Preface, *Roman Ritual. Rite of Exorcisms*.

³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 395.

³⁶ Cf. Rom 8, 28: «We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him».

³⁷ II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 37.

³⁸ Preface, *Roman Ritual. Rite of Exorcisms*.

³⁹ Cf. Acts 5, 19: «But at the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors »; Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 110, a.3, ad3: «the motive power of the soul is limited to the body united to it, which is vivified by it, and by which it can move other things. But an angel's power is not limited to any body; hence it can move locally bodies not joined to it».

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 111, a.3, c: «both a good and a bad angel by their own natural power can move the human imagination»; ibidem, a.4, c: «an angel, by his own natural power, can work a change in the senses [of Man]».

⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 110, a.4, ad.2.

⁴² II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 19: «Many, *unduly* transgressing the limits of the positive sciences, contend that everything can be explained by this kind of scientific reasoning alone, or by contrast, they altogether disallow that there is any absolute truth» [Italic-typing by the author].

grounded in the Word of God, the true causes of the phenomena nowadays referred to as «paranormal» – traditionally known as «preternatural» – based especially on angelology.

29. Can demons possess people?

Usually, divine Providence only permits demons to tempt people into sin, but sometimes one finds cases of diabolical attacks that go beyond mere temptations. The majority of these extraordinary disorders are directly linked to forms of divination⁴³ or magic⁴⁴ in which, explicitly or implicitly, men resort to demons for help⁴⁵. Such pacts often confer demons the possibility of causing disorders that go beyond mere temptations.

30. What signs may indicate the presence of disorders of diabolical cause?

To know unlearned languages, as well as unknown facts, to display an abnormal force and to show aversion to sacred things⁴⁶. To see, to hear, to feel, to smell and to imagine things that psychological sciences cannot explain. To have diseases and somatic disorders that medical sciences cannot explain⁴⁷. Strange phenomena with objects and animals that science cannot explain, such as, for instance, things moving from their place on their own, home appliances that turn on and off by themselves, etc.

31. What is a malefice?

«A malefice is the power of harming others, thanks to a pact and with the help of demons. It differs from magic, which aims to perform wonders, while it aims to harm someone»⁴⁸. «Malefice contains a double evilness. On one hand, it is contrary to the virtue of religion, as it is a cult to the devil; on the other hand it is contrary to charity and justice, as it causes an unfair damage to neighbor»⁴⁹.

⁴³ Cf. Acts 16, 16-19: «As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. She followed Paul and us, crying, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation". And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers».

⁴⁴ Cf. Acts 19, 18-19: «Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all».

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 95, a.2, ad.2: «this kind of divination pertains to the worship of the demons, inasmuch as one enters into a compact, tacit or express, with the demons».

⁴⁶ Cf. General Rules, *Roman Ritual. Rite of Exorcisms*, No. 16.

⁴⁷ Cf. Luke 13, 11: «And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself».

⁴⁸ Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (Saint), *Theologia Moralis*, Rome, Tipografia Vaticana, 1905, tom. 1, lib. 3, tract. 1, cap. 1, dub. 5, n. 23.

⁴⁹ D. M. Prümmer, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis Secundum Principia S. Thomae Aquinatis*, 7.^a ed., Fribourg, Herder, 1928, vol. 2, n. 519 [our translation].

32. How can a malefice be destroyed?

Living a life in the grace of God, attending the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, through the sacramentals, especially exorcisms, the use of blessed religious objects, pilgrimages to holy places, invocation of saints, the destruction of the objects used in the malefice and prayers of deliverance⁵⁰.

33. How can we defend ourselves from diabolic attacks?

Living in union with God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, through faith, hope and charity⁵¹. Whoever lives in the presence of God is a living temple of the Holy Trinity⁵². One receives this sanctifying grace of God through the sacraments and prayer, thus why regular Confession and Holy Communion are so important. A christian who strives for sanctity, in order to love God more with the whole heart and to love neighbor in a better way, feels the urge to attend Mass and to receive Holy Communion every day, to go to confession every week, to pray the Holy Rosary every day, to meditate frequently on the Word of God and to worship Jesus, truly present in the Eucharist. All of this unites us to God and, therefore, defends us from demonic attacks.

34. What is an exorcism?

The exorcism is a sacramental. It is a liturgical celebration in which «the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion [...]. In a simple form, exorcism is performed at the celebration of Baptism. The solemn exorcism, called "a major exorcism," can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of the bishop»⁵³.

⁵⁰ Cf. Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (Saint), *Theologia Moralis*, Rome, Tipografia Vaticana, 1905, tom. 1, lib. 3, tract. 1, cap. 1, dub. 5, n. 24: «Against curses, one can licitly use: 1) Medical science's medicines [...]. 2) Exorcisms and the sacraments of the Church, pilgrimages, invocations of the saints, etc. 3) The destruction of the signs by means of which the devil attacks» [our translation].

⁵¹ Cf. Eph 6, 10-20: «Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand, therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which, you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak».

⁵² Cf. 1Cor 6, 19: «Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own».

⁵³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1673; Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1172: «§1. No one can perform exorcisms legitimately upon the possessed unless he has obtained special and express permission from the local ordinary. §2. The local ordinary is to give this permission only to a presbyter who has piety, knowledge, prudence, and integrity of life».

35. Where does the power to exorcise demons come from?

It comes from God and so Jesus, true God and true man, says: «But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you» (Luke 11, 20). Jesus conferred this same power on the twelve Apostles when He sent them as missionaries⁵⁴, later on on the 70 disciples⁵⁵ and finally on everyone who believe in Him, when he said: «Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover» (Mark 16, 15-18).

36. Are the faithful allowed to pray the little exorcism of Pope Leo XIII?

«[I]t is not even licit that the faithful use the formula of exorcism against Satan and the fallen angels, extracted from the one published by order of the Supreme Pontiff Leo XIII, and even less that they use the integral text of this exorcism»⁵⁶. The baptized faithful, though through Baptism have the capability to exercise demons, just like in the first centuries of the Church, they are currently forbidden to do it as it is a very delicate ministry that requires particular knowledge, prudence and experience, hence why nowadays it is only allowed to bishops or priests that have been nominated for this ministry.

37. What is a prayer of deliverance?

It is a prayer addressed to God in which, just like in the last petition of the «Our Father», one asks to be delivered from a diabolical influx. «When we ask to be delivered from the Evil One, we pray as well to be freed from all evils, present, past, and future, of which he is the author or instigator»⁵⁷.

38. In the case of people presenting a light diabolical disorder, should a priest pray the prayers of deliverance, even if he is not an exorcist?

Yes, he should. «It is needed to soundly distinguish between the Major Exorcism, limited to the bishop or the one on whom the bishop has delegated – because an exorcist cannot be improvised –, from the prayer of deliverance that should be normal to all of us, priests. It is

⁵⁴ Cf. Luke 9, 1: «And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases».

⁵⁵ Cf. Luke 10, 17-20: «The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."».

⁵⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to Ordinaries regarding norms on Exorcism*, September 29th, 1985.

⁵⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2854.

a prayer uttered with the authority of Jesus, the saints and the angels, with the aim of interceding for a person, who is not possessed, but rather infested, disturbed by diabolic attacks. It is needed to provide this service to our faithful, as it is part of our ministry as priests»⁵⁸.

39. Can the faithful pray a prayer of deliverance?

Yes, they can. The Lord Jesus wants all of His disciples to pray the «Our Father» and, therefore, that they ask the heavenly Father the deliverance from the «power of the evil one» (1 John 5, 19). In the last petition of the «Our Father», «evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God»⁵⁹.

40. What is the purpose of a prayer of deliverance and to what extent is it effective?

It is effective as any other petition to God⁶⁰. It should be done with the required attitude⁶¹ and be in accordance with the divine plan of love and salvation for each one of us⁶². Specifically, it attains the grace it asks for, that is the effective deliverance from diabolical dominion and from all the evils caused by demons. Furthermore, it helps discerning possible cases of possession, obsession, vexation or diabolical infestation.

⁵⁸ Christoph Schönborn (cardinal), *La Joie d’Être Prêtre. A la Suite du Curé d’Ars, ouverture par le pape Benoît XVI*, Nouan-le-Fuzelier, Éditions des Béatitudes, 2009, p. 90 [our translation].

⁵⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2851.

⁶⁰ Cf. John 16, 24: «ask, and you will receive»; Matt 7, 7-8: «Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks it will be opened».

⁶¹ To be prayed in the name of Jesus (Cf. John 16, 23: «if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name»), with faith (Cf. Matt 21, 22: «And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive»; Jas 1, 6 «ask in faith, with no doubting»), humbly (Cf. Luke 18, 10-14; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2559: «humility is the foundation of prayer»), with perseverance (Cf. Rom 12, 12: «constant in prayer») and preferably in a group (Matt 18, 19: «if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven»).

⁶² Cf. Luke 22, 42: «Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will but thine be done.»; 2 Cor 12, 8-9: «Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”».

Attachments

Prayer of deliverance

«Deliver us from evil» (Matt 6, 13)

The Lord Jesus, in the last petition of the «Our Father», exhorts all of His disciples to continually ask the Father of Heaven for the deliverance from Evil. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, explaining the sense of this last petition of the Lord's Prayer, that «in this petition, evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God. The devil ("dia-bolos") is the one who "throws himself across" God's plan and His work of salvation accomplished in Christ» (No. 2851). «When we ask to be delivered from the Evil One, we pray as well to be freed from all evils, present, past and future, of which he is the author and instigator» (No. 2854). The following prayer of deliverance asks the Father of Heaven for the deliverance from the Evil One and from all evils of which he is the author and instigator. It can be prayed to ask God for the deliverance from a diabolical disorder for oneself or interceding for someone else.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

R. Amen.

Saint Michael, the Archangel, defends in the day of battle. Be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly hosts, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits, who prowl through the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen

A reading from the Book of Deuteronomy (**Deut 18, 9-12**)

When you come into the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD; and because of these abominable practices the LORD your God is driving them out before you.

The Word of the Lord.

R. Thanks be to God.

Psalm 106, 34-40

Refrain: By Your infinite mercy, save us, o Lord.

They did not destroy the peoples,
as the LORD had commanded them,
but they mingled with the nations
and learned to do as they did.

They served their idols,
which became a snare to them.
They sacrificed their sons
and their daughters to the demons;

they poured out innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan,
and the land was polluted with blood.

Thus they became unclean by their acts,
and played the harlot in their doings.
Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people,
and he abhorred his heritage.

Reading from the holy Gospel according to Saint Mark (**Mark 16, 15-20**)

And he said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it.

The Gospel of the Lord.

R. Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.

N. Do you renounce Satan and all his angels?

R. Yes, I do.

Do you renounce all his incitements into sin and into rebellion against God?

R. Yes, I do.

Do you renounce to all his seductions: magic, wizardry, witchcraft, astrology, divination, invocation of the dead, spiritualism, idolatry, satanic worshiping, satanic music, superstition and all forms of occultism?

R. Yes, I do.

Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth?

R. Yes, I do.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father?

R. Yes, I do.

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting?

R. Yes, I do.

This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

R. Amen.

Faithful to the teachings of the Saviour, we dare to say:

Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgives our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but delivers from evil. Deliver us from all evil and from all diabolical disturbances, Thee, whom through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, hath delivered us from the power of darkness and death and hath transferred us into Thy Kingdom of light and holiness, deliver now this brother of ours, N., from all dominion and bond to Satan and his angels. Deliver him from all forces of evil, crush them, destroy them, so that N. may get well and live according to Thy most holy will. Deliver him from all malefices, witchcraft, dark magic, dark Masses, spells, maledictions, evil-eye, satanic rites, satanic cults, consecrations to Satan. Destroy any bond to Satan and to every person related to Satan, whether living or dead. Deliver him from all diabolical infestation, from all diabolical possession, from all diabolical obsessions and from all sin or consequence of sin. Destroy all these evils in hell so that they may torment N. or any other creature of this world no more. God almighty Father, I beseech Thee, in the Name of Jesus Christ the Saviour and through the intersection of the Immaculate Virgin, to ordain all impure spirits and all presences that torment N. to leave him immediately, to leave him forever and to go to everlasting hell, enchained by Saint Michael the Archangel, by Saint Gabriel, by Saint Raphael, by our Guardian Angels, crushed underneath the heel of the most holy Virgin Mary, our Immaculate Mother. Thou, Who hast created man in Thy image and likeness in holiness and justice and following sin hast

forsaken him not, rather with wise providence cared for his salvation through the mystery of incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Thy dearly beloved Son, save this servant of Thine and deliver him from evil and from the enslaving of the enemy; cast away from him the spirit of lie, pride, lust, avarice, wrath, envy, gluttony, sloth and from all kinds of evilness. Welcome him into Thy Kingdom, open his heart to understand Thy Gospel, so that he may always live as a child of light, may bear witness to the truth and carry out works of charity according to Thy commandments. Cast away, o Lord, with the breath from Thy mouth, all evil spirits: ordain their retreat as Thy Kingdom has come. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son, God with Thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

R. Amen.

May the Lord deliver you from all evil, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

R. Amen.

Let us praise the Lord.

R. Thanks be to God.

With ecclesiastical approval

«Render to God the things that are God's» (Matt 22, 21)

The moral virtue of religion

1. Introduction: the man searching for God

Each human person has been created by God so as to delight in His own intimate life, that is to be able to participate in the intra-Trinitarian life of communion through a personal, cognitive and loving relationship with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. So, one can say that the human person «from his conception, he is destined for eternal beatitude»⁶³, and will only find fulfillment in it. «Thou madest us for Thyself», Saint Augustine tells, «and our heart is restless, until it repos in Thee»⁶⁴.

We have all been created to God, and this fact, in a certain way, shapes all human actions, which appear as an answer to that fundamental vocation. We «seek Thy face» (Dan 3, 41), o Lord! Man naturally searches for God. In fact, «the root reason for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to His Creator»⁶⁵. Thus, man has the vocation to recognize his Created, to enter into dialogue with Him and to lovingly surrender himself to Him.

However, how can we achieve such a communion of life with the Holy Trinity to which we have all been created and to which the deepest wish of our heart tends to? This ultimate destiny of man, of participating in the eternal life, exceeds to a great extent his own natural capabilities, and he can do nothing else than to expect it as a gift from divine kindness. That gift has been being prepared throughout the whole History of Salvation and is freely given to us in Jesus Christ, Son of God: «For God so loved the world that he gave his

⁶³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1703.

⁶⁴ Augustine of Hippo (Saint), *Confessions*, 1,1,1.

⁶⁵ II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 19.

only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life» (John 3, 16). Thus, to reach eternal life, one is required to believe in the only begotten Son of God, Who in «the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear»⁶⁶, that is the calling for making oneself, in Christ, participant in the divine nature (cf. 2 Pet 1, 4).

To accept the gift of eternal life it is required a right-willing heart, which needs to believe in Jesus, open to the truth and to love. This fact implies and continual conversion from the darkness of mistake and from the attitude of living «for themselves» (2 Cor 5, 15). Man is called to embrace, by means of the faith in Christ, the «truth about God» (Rom 1, 25) and to accept His merciful love. In fact, we believe that «God's love has been poured into our hearts» (Rom 5, 5), and therefore «we love, because He first loved us» (1 John 4, 19).

Hence, it is necessary, to state that, on one side, the access to eternal life is a free gift that exceeds Man's natural forces, wounded by sin, that divine Mercy offers us in Christ and precedes any merit on our part. On the other side, to receive the gift of communion with the triune God in the eternal life, Man must set his heart righteously, through the act of faith in Jesus, which assumes a honest search of the truth and the desire to live according to the commandment of love. «Man's faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man, and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith»⁶⁷; and therefore, man's participation in the eternal life, that is in the intimate intra-Trinitarian life, presents itself simultaneously as a gift to accept and a vocation to answer to.

1.1. Man's religious dimension has an intrinsic ethical component

Man does not seek to know God only to satisfy his «thirst» of truth in the religious field, but also to be able to guide his behaviour, that is to be able to fill with a sense his existence, to be able to serve and to love God in the utmost pleasing way to Him. Just like in any other inter-personal relationship, to know the other is an indispensable premise to build up the relationship of friendship. Therefore, it can be stated that there is a strong link between the knowledge of the truth about God and moral behaviour. When one ignores or errs about God, human behavior becomes corrupted. It is not surprising that Saint Paul, addressing the pagans, says that «they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give him thanks, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. [...] And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit,

⁶⁶ II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 22.

⁶⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 35.

malignty, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless» (Rom 1, 20-21.28-31). The rejection of God ends up producing severe moral disorders, which, in a sense, make evident such rejection.

It is now clearer that the religious dimension of the human person is not limited to his cognitive component, but has also an intrinsic moral dimension. The acknowledgment of the Creator and His gifts brings man, almost instinctively, to honour Him and show Him his gratitude, even with exterior acts. In this line of thought, the II Vatican Council reminds that in «accordance with their dignity as persons – that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility – all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth»⁶⁸.

1.2. Man, *capax Dei*, nowadays: post-modern meaningfulness of the message of religion

The human person, thanks to its reasoning and will, is capable of knowing and loving God. Saint Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says that the divine perfections can be contemplated in the work of Creation (Cf. Rom 1, 19-20) and, therefore, «the same Holy Mother Church holds and teaches that God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certitude by the natural light of human reason from created things»⁶⁹. In that sense, it can be said that Man is a being open to the Transcendent, is a being that naturally questions about the foundations and the purposes of the created, and this same search, that is natural to him, drives him to God and thus configures itself as a religious search. The human person, in fact, «by his reason, is capable of understanding the order of things established by the Creator. By free will, he is capable of directing himself toward his true good»⁷⁰ and so finding beatitude. To say that man is a being that naturally searches for God does not imply that this natural tendency is indeed accomplished in practical terms by all. On the contrary, Man can freely renounce such a quest for God and be satisfied by «little» truths. However, «although man can forget God or reject Him, He never ceases to call every man to seek Him, so as to find life and happiness. But this search for God demands of man every effort of intellect, a sound will, "an upright heart" as well as the witness of others who teach him to seek God»⁷¹.

⁶⁸ II Vatican Council, Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, No. 2.

⁶⁹ I Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, c.2.

⁷⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1704.

⁷¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 30.

This quest for God is, by its own nature, a demanding work, which has become even more difficult due to the disorder that sin introduced in Man's heart. «For though, absolutely speaking, human reason by its own natural force and light can arrive at a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God, Who by His providence watches over and governs the world, and also of the natural law, which the Creator has written in our hearts, still there are not a few obstacles to prevent reason from making efficient and fruitful use of its natural ability. The truths that have to do with God and the relations between God and men, completely surpass the sensible order and demand self-surrender and self-abnegation in order to be put into practice and to influence practical life. Now the human intellect, in gaining the knowledge of such truths is hampered both by the activity of the senses and the imagination, and by evil passions arising from original sin. Hence men easily persuade themselves in such matters that what they do not wish to believe is false or at least doubtful»⁷². Then, it happens frequently that the environment in which a human person grows up and matures is poisoned with mistakes and moral vices that generate more obstacles to this fundamental quest. The nowadays post-modern western culture has developed a subjective and anti-metaphysical type of reasoning that drives to a strong skepticism in regard to the natural capabilities of human reason and at the same time proposes certain vices as being true values that we should seek in our lives. This anti-culture that has been being developed during the last centuries makes Man's natural access to God harder to the new generations. It is extremely evident that «in the historical conditions in which he finds himself, however, man experiences many difficulties in coming to know God by the light of reason alone»⁷³. God alone can tell us with absolute certainty who He truly is, which has happened throughout the History of Salvation, which had its apex in Jesus Christ, Who revealed us the true face of the Father and gave us the vivifying law of the Spirit.

2. The man, *naturaliter* religious: the moral virtue of religion

«The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God»⁷⁴, and this fact explains why all men from all times can be known as «beings in search of God». The theoretical and practical denial of the existence of God, nowadays diffused in some of cultural environments, presents itself therefore as a non-natural phenomenon and of an exceptional character if one considers mankind's history as a whole.

2.1. The religious acts in Sacred Scripture and in history

It is very much evident that Man has persistently felt the natural need to pay worship to divinity throughout time. In fact, thanks to the natural light of reason, he is in condition

⁷² Pius XII (Pope), Encyclical *Humani Generis*, DH 3875.

⁷³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 37.

⁷⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 27.

to acknowledge God as the primary source from which all gifts and perfections of being proceed. At the same time, it must be said that the way this tendency came about in history is manifold, even though some common trends can be differentiated from among the various situations. In a broader sense, it can be stated that «in many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behavior: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a *religious being*»⁷⁵. Man naturally searched for God and spontaneously honours Him and, therefore, the virtue of religion must be considered among human virtues and not among supernatural infused virtues.

The emphasis may change from one religion to the other, but in general terms it is verifiable that the worship of God has both an interior and exterior dimension and an individual and community dimension. Man worships God not only in his heart, but also through external gestures and rites and also not only isolated, but also, and above all, as a member of a community of believers.

There are certain elements that we can find in all religions, such as: the sacred places, the sacred objects, the sacred persons, the sacred seasons, the sacred rites, the prayers and at last the sacred precepts.

However, In the religions founded on revelations, man does not seek to pay worship to God based on his own ideas and intuitions, but God Himself takes initiative and throughout the History of Salvation teaches man, gradually, the right way to pay Him the owed cult, such Revelation having its highest point in the mystery of the incarnate Word ⁷⁶, Who gave us His own Spirit, Who enables us to worship the Father in spirit and truth (cf. John 4, 24), that is to say introduces us in the most perfect way of worshipping God.

Whether for Israel or for the Church, divine worshipping is the «place» in which it is remembered and proclaimed God's wonders for His People, especially His covenants, which always include a worshipping dimension so as to be celebrated and renewed throughout time.

⁷⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 28.

⁷⁶ II Vatican Council, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, No. 5: «God who "wills that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2, 4), "who in many and various ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets" (Heb 1, 1), when the fullness of time had come sent His Son, the Word made flesh, anointed by the Holy Spirit, to preach the the gospel to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart [Cf. Is 61, 1; Luke 4, 18], to be a "bodily and spiritual medicine" [Ignatius of Antioch (Saint), *Ad Eph.* 7, 2; ed. F. X. FUNK, Tubingae, *Patres Apostolici I*, 1901, p. 218], the Mediator between God and man [Cf. 1 Tim 2, 5]. For His humanity, united with the person of the Word, was the instrument of our salvation. Therefore in Christ "the perfect achievement of our reconciliation came forth, and the fullness of divine worship was given to us" [*Sacramentarium Veronense* (Leonianum), Romae, ed. C. Mohlberg, 1956, No. 1265, p. 162]. The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ the Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He achieved His task principally by the paschal mystery of His blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and the glorious ascension, whereby "dying, he destroyed our death and, rising, he restored our life" [Easter Preface of the Roman Missal]».

It is interesting to see that in the history of salvation the sacrifices appear only after the sin and that God, Who «scrutinizes all hearts» (1 Chr 28, 9), takes especially into account the interior temperaments of the offerer (cf. Gen 4, 3-5). Some perversions used in pagan worshiping become forbidden, such as human sacrifices (cf. Gen 22, 2; 2 Kgs 16, 3; Lev 20, 2 ff.), sacred prostitution (cf. 1Kgs 22, 47; Deut 23, 18) and God's representation in images (cf. Deut 4, 15-18; Exod 32, 4 ff.).

With Moses, the worshiping legislation becomes more and more abundant and precise. The Arc of the Covenant, sign of the presence of God, becomes the central place for the cult. Later on, Salomon builds the temple where the Arc will be laid, and in the time of the deuteronomic reform it becomes the only place for the sacrificial cult.

With the coming of Jesus, the perfect cult is established. He Himself, above all in the mystery of His Easter, pays to the Father the perfect act of cult, which will also be entrusted as a sacrament to His Church with the institution of the Eucharist, and at the same time renders His disciples capable of worshiping the Father in spirit and truth (cf. John 4, 23-24). The possibility of glorifying the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, is now given to the faithful, since «baptism imprints on the soul an indelible spiritual sign, the character, which consecrates the baptized person for Christian worship»⁷⁷.

The «religious» duties, in the strict sense, are those that regard the cult owed to God, but, contrary to the natural religions, in the Jewish-Christian tradition, God Himself has taught His People to thank Him and to pay Him worship in the utmost pleasing way to Him. This revelation from God raises the moral natural virtue of religion up. Now, Man, taught by God Himself, can worship Him in the most adequate way and so God is fully glorified and Man abundantly sanctified with His gifts.

2.2. Nature of the virtue of religion: man in front of God

The word «religion» comes from the Latin word *religo*. «According to Cicero (106-43 a.C.), the word is the opposite to *superstitio* and is derived from *re-legere* [...], in the two senses that it can assume: “re-read”, that is to meticulously perform the acts of cult (of which there is probably a written support), and “collect”, “observe” the signs of divine communication, that is to make a prognosis of the future. Macrobius (4th century) mentions the definition of Servius Sulpicius Galba, where the word is derived from *relinquere*, that is “to leave”, in the sense that the world is strictly distinct between sacred and profane: the religious domain is therefore firmly distinct from the non-religious, which should be “leaved”, “abandoned”. In the christian author Latantius (3rd century), the word is derived

⁷⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1280.

from *religare*, that is “to bond”, with a clear reference to the bond of piety that unites us to God [...] and this will be the most commonly used definition in a christian sense»⁷⁸.

What matters to us at this point is religion not as anthropological, social or cultural reality, but as a natural moral virtue, that is as existential disposition that perfects the human person as such in what concerns the cult owed to God.

«By his reason, man recognizes the voice of God which urges him “to do what is good and avoid what is evil.”⁷⁹ Everyone is obliged to follow this law, which makes itself heard in conscience and is fulfilled in the love of God and of neighbor»⁸⁰. Besides that, concerning his relationship with God, Man naturally acknowledges the necessity of recognizing Him firstly from his works, of thanking Him for all His gifts, of trusting himself to His lovingly protection. Such an inner disposition to do «all to the glory of God» (1 Cor 10, 31) comes naturally exteriorly expressed through the acts of cult to God, through which we give witness to His divine attributes and implore His blessing.

The object of the virtue of religion is, in the proper sense, the *cult owed to God*⁸¹. Man, as we have said, naturally acknowledges the duty of justice⁸² of honoring the Creator of Heaven and Earth. It is obvious that in this case it is not about a relationship of justice in a strict sense, since that the equality between the different parts is missing. Actually, man and God are not on the same level; nevertheless, it does not mean that one cannot talk about something that is owed in justice to someone supremely superior and excellent⁸³, which is in a very different level than ours. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, «it belongs to religion to show reverence to one God [...] as the first principle of the creation and government of things»⁸⁴. To recognize the Creator implies to subsequently honour Him for everything He created and for the admirable way He guides everything in His plan of wisdom and love. Therefore, the virtue of religion does not have God as its immediate object, but the glorification of God by His rational creatures, that is to say it has as its specific object the exterior glory of God, which comes to fulfillment through the acts of cult.

⁷⁸ A. Porcarrelli, «Religione», in *Dizionario Interdisciplinare di Scienza e Fede*, G. Tanzella-Nitti e A. Strumia (eds.), vol. 2, Rome, Urbaniana University Press – Città Nuova, 2002, pp. 1199-1200 [our translation].

⁷⁹ II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 16.

⁸⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1706.

⁸¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.81, a.4, co.: «Bonum autem ad quod ordinatur religio est exhibere Deo debitum honorem»; ibidem, a.8, co.: «religio dicitur secundum quod exhibet Deo debitum famulatum in his quae pertinent specialiter ad cultum divinum».

⁸² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1807: «Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. Justice toward God is called the “virtue of religion”».

⁸³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.81, a.4, ad.3: «obiectum autem honoris vel reverentiae est aliquid excellens».

⁸⁴ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.81, a.3, co.: «Ad religionem autem pertinet exhibere reverentiam uni Deo secundum unam rationem, inquantum scilicet est primum principium creationis et gubernationis rerum».

It is evident that «it is proper to religion to show reverence to God»⁸⁵, and thus the moral virtue of religion, contrary to the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, does not have God as its specific object, but the cult owed to God⁸⁶, and therefore «all those things through which reverence is shown to God, belong to religion»⁸⁷. Religion is a natural virtue in man because «it belongs to the dictate of natural reason that man should do something through reverence for God. But that he should do this or that determinate thing does not belong to the dictate of natural reason, but is established by Divine or human law»⁸⁸. In this line of thought it is interesting to see how Saint Paul considers that pagans who are capable of recognizing God with the natural light of reason are «without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him» (Rom 1, 20-21), that is to say that they are responsible for having not followed the demands of the right reason that leads us to recognize the Creator and to thank Him and to honour Him as such.

The necessity of honouring God Creator and Provider is intrinsic to human nature, even if the way such necessity is fulfilled is in practice dependent of historical, contextual, traditional, legal and other factors and is not immune to some ambiguities that frequently proceed from a partially distorted image of God. Only divine Revelation enables Man to finally pay cult to God «in spirit and truth» (John 4, 24).

The Aquinas also underlines that «religion is neither a theological nor an intellectual, but a moral virtue, since it is part of justice»⁸⁹, and that, among moral virtues, this one is found in a prominent level⁹⁰.

Seeking to summarize and to offer a definition, it can be state that *religion is the moral virtue through which we voluntarily and stably dispose ourselves to pay the cult owed to God as Creator and Provider.*

At this stage, one could ask: why does God need our cult? In fact, actually, God does not need our acts of cult. Being God, He is not lacking any perfection, His glory is infinite. To be able to honour and glorify Him is a gift of His kindness that to us, rational creatures, is extremely convenient as beings called to freely orientate to Him all our being and act⁹¹. In

⁸⁵ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.84, a.1, co.: «religionis proprium est reverentiam Deo exhibere».

⁸⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.83, a.3, co.: «ad religionem proprie pertinet reverentiam et honorem Deo exhibere».

⁸⁷ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.83, a.3, co.: «omnia illa per quae Deo reverentia exhibetur pertinent ad religionem».

⁸⁸ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.81, a.2, ad.3: «de dictamine rationis naturalis est quod homo aliqua faciat ad reverentiam divinam, sed quod haec determinate faciat vel illa, istud non est de dictamine rationis naturalis, sed de institutione iuris divini vel humani».

⁸⁹ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.81, a.5, ad.3: «religio non est virtus theologica neque intellectualis, sed moralis, cum sit pars iustitiae».

⁹⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.81, a.6, co.: «religio praeeminet inter alias virtutes morales».

⁹¹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.81, a.7, co.: «Deo reverentiam et honorem exhibemus non propter ipsum, qui in seipso est gloria plenus, cui nihil a creatura adiici potest, sed propter nos,

fact, «the end of divine worship is that man may give glory to God, and submit to Him in mind and body»⁹², a task that always remains not totally fulfilled and thus commits man throughout his whole pilgrimage on this earth.

It is interesting to notice that the virtue of religion has a double relation to the theological virtue of faith. On one side, it requires and presupposes faith in the sense that it would not be possible to honour a God that is not believed to exist. In this sense, it can be said that faith allows and in a certain sense is directed to the virtue of religion⁹³. However, on the other side, we know that it is through the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity that all human actions are ordained to communion with God and therefore – according to this perspective – religion is ordained to faith and, from here, together with hope and charity, it receives its ultimate perfection. «The theological virtues of faith, hope and charity inform and give life to the moral virtues. Thus charity leads us to render to God what we as creatures owe him in all justice. The *virtue of religion* disposes us to have this attitude»⁹⁴. In a sense, it can be said that «religion is a protestation of faith, hope and charity, whereby man is primarily directed to God»⁹⁵.

Besides this strict sense of religion that we have just characterized, one can also talk about religion in a wider and more generic sense, a sense which embraces all the acts of the theological virtues that are acts that concern our personal relationship with the living God, though most of the times they are not acts of cult in the strictest sense. In this wider sense, it can be said that all human action is aimed at becoming, through faith, hope and charity, a religious act, a «spiritual worship» (Rom 12, 1) to God.

Man's natural sense of religion impels him to search for God; however, the image of God that man, with his own strength, builds up is not immune to mistakes that induce the major or minor perverted ways of superstition. God, however, with Revelation, has enlightened Man with a new light, a right truth that proceeds from on High and enlightens in a definite way the identity of God and the way Man is called to pay Him cult. In Christ, the

quia videlicet per hoc quod Deum reveremur et honoramus, mens nostra ei subiicitur, et in hoc eius perfectio consistit »; ibidem a.1, co.: «religio proprie importat ordinem ad Deum».

⁹² Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.93, a.2, co.: «Finis autem divini cultus est ut homo Deo det gloriam, et ei se subiiciat mente et corpore».

⁹³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Super De Trinitate*, pars 2, q.3, a.2, co.5: «actus fidei pertinet quidem materialiter ad religionem, sicut et actus aliarum virtutum, et magis, in quantum actus fidei est primus motus mentis in Deum. Sed formaliter a religione distinguitur, utpote aliam rationem obiecti considerans. Convenit etiam fides cum religione praeter hoc, in quantum fides est religionis causa et principium. Non enim aliquis eligeret cultum Deo exhibere, nisi fide teneret Deum esse creatorem, gubernatorem et remuneratorem humanorum actuum. Ipsa tamen religio non est virtus theologica».

⁹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2095.

⁹⁵ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.101, a.3, ad1: «religio est quaedam protestatio fidei, spei et caritatis, quibus homo primordialiter ordinatur in Deum».

face of the Father is revealed (cf. John 19, 4) and unto us is given «the fullness of divine worship»⁹⁶.

As we have said, the virtue of religion is a moral virtue, in other words it is a habit that renders stable a disposition of will regarding the cult owed to God. The acts sprouted from the virtue of religion are not limited to interior dispositions, but, due to the spiritual and corporeal nature of the human person, manifest themselves externally in various ways, as human history demonstrates. It is not just the persons, considered individually, that acknowledge the need to externalize the inner disposition and, therefore, to render to God an external cult, but also the various human communities, belonging to a variety of religious traditions, feel the need, as a community, of rendering to God a public cult. It is the civil authorities' duty to guarantee such a fundamental right, having always in mind the demands of the common good and simultaneously recognizing their non-competence in matters of religious truths. In fact, «every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious»⁹⁷.

2.3. The main religious acts of Man

Just like all other virtues, the virtue of religion generates various acts that render it operational; such acts vary in level of importance. In fact, it is of utmost importance to state that «adoration is the first act of the virtue of religion. To adore God is to acknowledge him as God, as the Creator and Savior, the Lord and Master of everything that exists, as infinite and merciful Love»⁹⁸. The special importance of adoration has its foundation in the fact that «is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator»⁹⁹. It is an act of fundamental justice toward God, that the rational creature may recognize the truth of its condition of creature before the greatness of its Creator. This act of truth involves all the dimensions of the human person and expresses itself through adoration, which is mainly an internal act, but also has an external dimension¹⁰⁰.

The adoration owed to God has, in a way, a minimum that can be expressed with the biblical concept of «fear of God», by which we respect the divine Persons as such. «Respect

⁹⁶ II Vatican Council, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, No. 5; *Sacramentarium Veronense (Leonianum)*, Romae, C. Mohlberg (ed.), 1956, No. 1265, p. 162.

⁹⁷ II Vatican Council, Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, No. 3.

⁹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2096.

⁹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2628.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.84, a.2, ad.2: «adoratio principaliter quidem in interiori Dei reverentia consistit, secundario autem in quibusdam corporalibus humilitatis signis, sicut genu flectimus nostram infirmitatem significantes in comparatione ad Deum; prosternimus autem nos quasi profitentes nos nihil esse ex nobis».

for his name is an expression of the respect owed to the mystery of God himself and to the whole sacred reality it evokes. The sense of the sacred is part of the virtue of religion»¹⁰¹.

Another important act of the virtue of religion is *devotion*, which consists in the disposition of the will through which Man readily and generously dedicates himself to all that concerns divine service¹⁰².

The consideration the divine attributes, majesty, mercy, etc., is what impels Man to devotion; however, the human mind, due to its finitude and weakness, has difficulties in considering divine things directly. Usually, its needs to start from the closest sensitive realities, among which, in first place, there is the most holy humanity of Jesus¹⁰³.

Devotion has the joy of heart as its specific effect. On the other side, pride and presumption hinder devotion, this being the reason why Saint Thomas says that «in simple souls and women devotion abounds»¹⁰⁴.

Another important specific act of the virtue of religion is *prayer*. Given its importance and types, we shall look at it more deeply later on. For now, it is enough to say that through prayer Man honours God in various ways because he loves His excellency, recognizes His Providence, entrusts himself to His Mercy, etc.

The *sacrifices* offered to God are also a specific act of the virtue of religion. According to saint Thomas, «the offering of sacrifices is of the natural law»¹⁰⁵, as mankind's history testifies, «but the determination of sacrifices is established by God or by man»¹⁰⁶. The external sacrifices offered up to God are a sign of the internal and spiritual sacrifices through which Man offers himself up to God¹⁰⁷. In this line of thought, the *Catechism* states that «[i]t is right to offer sacrifice to God as a sign of adoration and gratitude, supplication and communion»¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2144.

¹⁰² Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 82, a. 1, co.: «devotio nihil aliud esse videtur quam voluntas quaedam prompte tradendi se ad ea quae pertinent ad Dei famulatum»; Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 82, a. 3, co.: «devotio est quidam voluntatis actus ad hoc quod homo prompte se tradat ad divinum obsequium»; Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 82, a. 1, ad 1: «devotio sit actus voluntatis hominis offerentis seipsum Deo ad ei serviendum».

¹⁰³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.82, a.3, ad.2: «ea quae sunt divinitatis sunt secundum se maxime excitantia dilectionem, et per consequens devotionem, quia Deus est super Omnia diligendus. Sed ex debilitate mentis humanae est quod sicut indiget manuduci ad cognitionem divinorum, ita ad dilectionem, per aliqua sensibilia nobis nota. Inter quae praecipuum est humanitas Christi».

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.82, a.3, ad.3: «in simplicibus et mulieribus devotio abundat».

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.85, a.1, co.: «oblatio sacrificii pertinet ad ius naturale».

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.85, a.1, ad.1: «Sed determinatio sacrificiorum est ex institutione humana vel divina».

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.85, a.2, co.: «oblatio sacrificii fit ad aliquid significandum. Significat autem sacrificium quod offertur exterius, interius spirituale sacrificium, quo anima seipsam offert Deo».

¹⁰⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2099.

Lastly there is the *vow* and the *oath*, which can be considered as extraordinary acts of the virtue of religion, and that we shall soon be examining in detail.

It must be also said that there are many acts of other virtues that are frequently governed by the virtue of religion, such as fasting, which, by nature, belongs to the virtue of abstinence¹⁰⁹, or alms, which, by nature, is an act of mercy¹¹⁰. So, in the broader sense, it can also be said that, for example, alms and fasting, when ordained into giving glory to God, are religious acts¹¹¹.

2.3.1. Cult to God

Generically speaking, it can be said that «religion consists, in fact, in divine cult»¹¹², given that all its acts, in one way or another, are ordained to it. More specifically, we would say that «the end of divine worship is that man may give glory to God, and submit to Him in mind and body»¹¹³, hence the acts of religion have a double intrinsic aim: the glorification of God and the ordering of every man to God.

The acts of cult can be distinguished according to different criteria:

- a) *Public* and *private* acts of cult. Public acts of cult are those in which the community of believers pays cult to God following rites and prayers that have been determined by the competent authority. For example, the liturgical acts belong to the public acts of cult whereas personal prayers belong to the private acts of cult.
- b) *Compulsory* acts of cult and *recommended* acts of cult. For example, for the catholic faithful it is a compulsory act of cult to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation¹¹⁴, or to fast on Ash Wednesday and Holy Friday¹¹⁵. On the other side, it is recommended to priests the daily celebration of the Holy Eucharist¹¹⁶.
- c) *Ordinary* acts of cult and *extraordinary* acts of cult. For example, the celebration of the Eucharist or the Rosary prayed in family are ordinary acts of cult; and, on the

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.147, a.2, ad.2: «nihil prohibet actum unius virtutis pertinere ad aliam virtutem, secundum quod ad eius finem ordinatur [...]. Et secundum hoc, nihil prohibet ieiunium pertinere ad religionem».

¹¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Super Sent.*, lib. 4, d. 15, q. 2, a. 1, qc. 3, co.: «eleemosyna est actus misericordiae»; Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.85, a.3, co.: «Contingit autem etiam ea quae secundum alias virtutes fiunt, in divinam reverentiam ordinari, puta cum aliquis eleemosynam facit de rebus propriis propter Deum, vel cum aliquis proprium corpus alicui afflictioni subiicit propter divinam reverentiam».

¹¹¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1969: «The New Law practices the acts of religion: almsgiving, prayer and fasting, directing them to the "Father who sees in secret," in contrast with the desire to "be seen by men».

¹¹² Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 130, n6: «Religio enim in cultu divino consistit».

¹¹³ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.93, a.2, co.: «Finis autem divini cultus est ut homo Deo det gloriam, et ei se subiiciat mente et corpore».

¹¹⁴ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1247.

¹¹⁵ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1251.

¹¹⁶ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 904.

other side, the oath and the vow, which we be looking at in detail later on, are extraordinary acts of cult.

- d) *Supreme* (or absolute) and *inferior* (or relative) acts of cult. The supreme or absolute, also known as *latría*, concerns God alone; on the contrary, the inferior or relative cult, also known as *dulia*, is the one through which holy persons or things are venerated and through which honour is given to God, Who is the «fount of all holiness»¹¹⁷. A supreme act of cult is, for example, the Eucharistic adoration, given that in the Eucharist Jesus Himself is present, the second Person of the Holy Trinity¹¹⁸. An inferior or relative act of cult is, for example, the veneration of the cross or the saints, through prayers addressed to them, even though it must be said that the saints are not exactly in the same level as the holy things. Actually, due to their free collaboration with divine action, they are responsible, though in a secondary way, for their excellence. Among all, in a highly singular place is the Mother of God, to whom is owed a special veneration – also known as *hyperdulia*.

2.3.2. Prayer

«Prayer is the raising of the soul to God or the request of convenient goods, made to God»¹¹⁹, or, in a more precise way, «[c]hristian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ»¹²⁰. Such covenant relationship requires that the faithful «live [...] in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God»¹²¹, fount of all goodness. Each man «thirsts» for this vital relation (cf. Ps 41, 3; Ps 62, 2) and therefore acknowledges the natural necessity for prayer. This natural disposition for the dialogue with God that we find in our heart is a work of the Creator, and therefore it can be said that «the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer»¹²². He waits the eyesight of every heart. Wherever men are¹²³, in whatever circumstances they are, God makes prayer to spring from humble hearts.

Man prays with all the dimensions of his person: «my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God» (Ps 84, 2). Firstly with his intelligence, which is fueled through the senses. Behind everyday situations, Man is able to see the «hand» of the one who governs everything. «Prayer [...] is the relationship with God in historical events»¹²⁴. Then, just like in

¹¹⁷ «Eucharistic prayer II», *Roman Missal*.

¹¹⁸ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1374; Council of Trent, sess. 13, *Decretum de ss. Eucharistia*, can. 1.

¹¹⁹ John Damascene (Saint), *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 3, 24. [our translation].

¹²⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2564.

¹²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2558.

¹²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2567.

¹²³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.83, a.10, ad. 2: «oratio esse proprium rationalis creaturae».

¹²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2568.

any other interpersonal relationship, affection is also involved and can raise this human-divine dialogue.

Lastly, also corporeity, chant, vestments, the place, the time and many other factors help to fruitfully achieve this encounter between Man and God that prayer is. In the book of Psalms – prayer book that has God as its main author – is present this integral anthropology of prayer that has reached its greatest fulfillment and expression in Jesus, the major model for every praying person. «Prayed by Christ and fulfilled in him, the Psalms remain essential to the prayer of the Church»¹²⁵.

Prayer can assume various forms; the main are: worship, blessing, petition (or supplication), intercession, thanksgiving, meditation and praise. All these forms, instead of excluding one another, complement each other. The Eucharist is the most perfect prayer that exists. Actually, «contains and expresses all forms of prayer»¹²⁶.

Prayer can also be distinguished between vocal and mental prayer. Vocal prayer must be an external expression of a prayerful heart; otherwise, it would become vain. For this reason, the Lord has rebuked His people, when He said: «this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me» (Is 29, 13).

Every person is called to the loving dialogue with God that prayer is. Prayer is needed for salvation, given that, in His plan of salvation, God wants to give many of His graces through prayer¹²⁷. Jesus urges us to ask: «ask, and you will receive» (John 16, 24); and also to persevere in prayer: «watch at all times, praying» (Luke 21, 36)¹²⁸. Saint Paul insists in the same line of thought with the disciples about the need to unceasingly persevere in prayer: «be constant in prayer» (Rom 12, 12)¹²⁹. Saint Alphonsus summarizes the need to pray with the famous quote: «The one who prays, for sure saves himself; the one who does not pray, for sure condemns himself»¹³⁰. «Prayer is a vital necessity»¹³¹ for Man as such and that becomes even more incumbent in those that have received the gift of filial adoption in Baptism. To the children of God, all their prayers have a filial connotation, due to the Spirit

¹²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2586.

¹²⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2643.

¹²⁷ Cf. Ps 50 (49), 15: «and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me»; Is 58, 9: «Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am»; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2738: «Christian prayer is cooperation with his providence, his plan of love for men».

¹²⁸ Cf. Luke 18, 1: «And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart».

¹²⁹ Cf. Eph 6, 18: «pray at all times»; Col 4, 2: «continue steadfastly in prayer»; 1Thess 5, 17: «pray constantly».

¹³⁰ Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori (Saint), *Del Gran Mezzo della Preghiera*, part 1, c. 1, G. Cacciatore (ed.), Rome, 1962, p. 32 [our translation].

¹³¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2744.

who groans in us: «Abba, Father»¹³². «[T]he life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God»¹³³ that is our Father.

«The prayer of Jesus makes Christian prayer an efficacious petition. He is its model, he prays in us and with us»¹³⁴. «If our prayer is resolutely united with that of Jesus, in trust and boldness as children, we obtain all that we ask in his name, even more than any particular thing: the Holy Spirit himself, who contains all gifts»¹³⁵.

Prayer produces various fruits: the conversion of the heart to God, the enlightenment from God, the increase of grace, the growth in the theological and moral virtues, the recollection and strengthening of the soul and the resting of the soul in God¹³⁶.

There are various conditions that favour prayer. It should be done being in the grace of God,¹³⁷ with the heart, with an attentive mind¹³⁸, with a devote will, humbly¹³⁹, and preferably also expressed externally¹⁴⁰, accompanied by chants¹⁴¹, in a community¹⁴², performed continuously¹⁴³ and with perseverance¹⁴⁴.

Frequently, there are affective dispositions (feelings, moods, temptations, worries, etc.) that make it easier or harder to pray. These dispositions, in as much as they do not depend on our will, have no moral relevance, which does not mean that one should assume an attitude of indifference toward them. Man prays with all his being and is therefore called to integrate also in the prayer the affective dimension, in an active and positive way. This means that each one should strive, as much as possible, in favouring those affective dispositions that facilitate prayer and in suppressing those that hinder it.

Among all forms of prayer, the prayer of supplication deserves a particular consideration, due to its importance to human life and to its peculiar characteristics. Frequently, when we talk about «prayer» we are not considering prayer in a broad sense,

¹³² Cf. Rom 8, 15: «For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit».

¹³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2565.

¹³⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2740.

¹³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2741.

¹³⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.83, a.13, co.: «effectus orationis est quem praesentialiter efficit, scilicet quaedam spiritualis refectio mentis».

¹³⁷ Obviously, one is not denying that sinners should and must pray, neither that their prayers are true prayers.

¹³⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.83, a.13, co.

¹³⁹ Cf. Luke 18, 10-14; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2559: «humility is the foundation of prayer».

¹⁴⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2562: «Whether prayer is expressed in words or gestures, it is the whole man who prays».

¹⁴¹ Cf. Augustine of Hippo (Saint), *Enarratio in Psalmos*, 72, 1.

¹⁴² Cf. Matt 18, 19-20: «Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them».

¹⁴³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.83, a.14, co.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Luke 11, 5-8.

but rather referring to the prayer of supplication. This way of talking is also common among the Church Fathers and in liturgy, where *oratio* frequently means supplication.

The prayer of supplication expresses, on one side, the recognition of our finitude and inability to win over evil through our own strength, and, on the other, expresses trust in God, to Whom «nothing will be impossible» (Luke 1, 37), as well as in His kindness and compassion for our misery. Surely, at the root of the supplication one can find the love for our own goodness, which is not necessarily disordered, that leads us, in a second stage, to raise our eyes to Heaven and to entrust ourselves into the omnipotence and kindness of the Creator. This act of the virtue of religion give glory to God, because it requires the self-recognition as creature and to entrust oneself into the hands of God¹⁴⁵.

The Lord Jesus urges us insistently to the prayer of supplication: «Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you» (Matt 7, 7-8); «if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name. Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive» (John 16, 23-24). And also Saint Paul, in the same line of thought, urges the disciples by saying: «in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God» (Phil 4, 6).

The prayer that Jesus taught us is fundamentally a prayer of supplication, in which – according to Saint Matthew’s version¹⁴⁶ – there are seven petitions. «There is a hierarchy in these petitions: we pray first for the Kingdom, then for what is necessary to welcome it and cooperate with its coming»¹⁴⁷. Such does not prevent that «each one can, therefore, address to heaven various prayers according to his needs, nevertheless starting always with the Lord’s Prayer, that continues to be the fundamental prayer»¹⁴⁸.

The prayer of supplication must have some special characteristics: it must be done trustfully¹⁴⁹, unwavering in the heart¹⁵⁰, with resignation¹⁵¹, and special perseverance¹⁵².

The prayer of supplication’s specific fruit is the fulfillment of the request from God, especially if this comes fulfilled in the name of Jesus¹⁵³. In some cases our supplication is not satisfied, not because God does not listen but rather because God is a Father and knows

¹⁴⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2629.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Matt 6, 9-13.

¹⁴⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2632.

¹⁴⁸ Tertullian, *De Oratione*, 10.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Matt 21, 22: «whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith».

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Jas 1, 6: «let him ask in faith, with no doubting».

¹⁵¹ Cf. Luke 22, 42: «Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done».

¹⁵² Cf. Jas 5, 16: «the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects».

¹⁵³ Cf. John 16, 23: «If you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name»; 14, 13: «Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it».

what is most convenient for our salvation better than we do¹⁵⁴. In other cases we do not receive because we ask without the required dispositions¹⁵⁵.

2.3.3. Extraordinary acts of the virtue of religion: the vow and the oath

The vow and the oath are considered extraordinary acts of the virtue of religion, because by their own nature they do not happen as frequently as the others that we have mentioned above and, in a certain sense, we can also say that they are not as necessary or as owed as the others. Every Man is called to prayer and adoration, but making vows, oaths or promises depends on the free initiative of each one.

The vow is «a deliberate and free promise made to God about a possible and better good»¹⁵⁶. Once made, the vow creates a true justice obligation toward God and, therefore, «must be fulfilled by reason of the virtue of religion»¹⁵⁷. «Fidelity to promises made to God is a sign of the respect owed to the divine majesty and love for a faithful God»¹⁵⁸.

What is the exact meaning of the phrase «possible and better good»? According to Saint Thomas, such possible good «is said to be a greater good in comparison with that which is universally necessary for salvation»¹⁵⁹, and therefore one can say that it is something that goes beyond the «olympic» minimums required for eternal salvation. Obviously, these possible better goods should be considered exclusively among those goods that are effectively under the domain of the one doing the vow. It makes no sense to promise to God something that is not in our power to fulfill¹⁶⁰.

In the Old Testament there are many passages that help us to understand that the vowing to the Lord was very frequent and diffused among the chosen people. In the New

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Jas 4, 3: «You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions»; 2 Cor 12, 7-9: «And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"».

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.83, a.15, ad. 2: «ponuntur quatuor conditiones, quibus concurrentibus, semper aliquis impetrat quod petit, ut scilicet pro se petat, necessaria ad salutem, pie et perseveranter»; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2737: «If we ask with a divided heart, we are "adulterers" [Jas 4, 4]; God cannot answer us, for he desires our well-being, our life».

¹⁵⁶ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1191 §1.

¹⁵⁷ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1191 §1.

¹⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2101.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.88, a.2, co.: «dicitur esse maius bonum in comparatione ad bonum quod communiter est de necessitate salutis».

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.88, a.1, ad. 2: «voluntas movet rationem ad promittendum aliquid circa ea quae eius voluntati subduntur».

Testament such attestations are less frequent, revealing, nonetheless, continuity with the traditions of Israel¹⁶¹.

The reasons why vows are made are highly diverse. It can be said that through the vow a person renders stable his effort concerning the divine service, beseechs the divine aid and converts his virtuous works into a special act of cult¹⁶².

The vows can be of different types:

- a) *Absolut* or *conditioned* vows, depending on the existence or absence of a circumstance that limits the disposition of will.
- b) *Personal, real* or *mixed* vows. The personal ones concern an action to be done, whereas the real ones promise a material value¹⁶³.
- c) *Determined* or *disjunctive* vows. In the first ones the content of the promised is presented with a certain detail, whereas in the second ones a variety of finalizations are admitted.
- d) *Public* or *private* vows. «A vow is public if a legitimate superior accepts it in the name of the Church; otherwise, it is private»¹⁶⁴.
- e) *Solemn* or *simple* vows. «A vow is solemn if the Church has recognized it as such; otherwise, it is simple»¹⁶⁵.

The ecclesiastical authority can, on reasonable cause, exempt the faithful from the vows that had been made. «In addition to the Roman Pontiff, the following can dispense from private vows for a just cause provided that a dispensation does not injure a right acquired by others:

§ 1 the local ordinary and the pastor with regard to all their subjects and even travelers;

§ 2 the superior of a religious institute or society of apostolic life if it is clerical and of pontifical right with regard to members, novices, and persons who live day and night in a house of the institute or society;

§ 3 those to whom the Apostolic See or the local ordinary has delegated the power of dispensing»¹⁶⁶.

¹⁶¹ Cf. For example: Gen 28, 20-22: «Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee"; 1 Sam 1, 11: «And she vowed a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thy maidservant, and remember me, and not forget thy maidservant, but wilt give to thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head"; Acts 18, 18: «After this Paul stayed many days longer then took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cen'chre-ae he cut his hair, for he had a vow».

¹⁶² Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.88, aa. 5-6.

¹⁶³ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can 1192, § 3.

¹⁶⁴ *Code of Canon Law*, can 1192, § 1.

¹⁶⁵ *Code of Canon Law*, can 1192, § 2.

Concerning the possibility of swapping the vow for a good deed, it must be said that «[t]he person who makes a private vow can commute the work promised by the vow into a better or equal good; however, one who has the power of dispensing [...] can commute it into a lesser good»¹⁶⁷.

The other extraordinary act of the virtue of religion is the *oath*. The oath is «the invocation of the divine name in witness to the truth»¹⁶⁸. Such act, since it explicitly involves God's witnessing, must be done «in truth, in justice, and in uprightness» (Jer 7, 2), in other words, to «invoke divine truthfulness as a pledge of one's own truthfulness»¹⁶⁹ provided reasons must be given. «The holiness of the divine name demands that we [do not] use it for trivial matters [...]»¹⁷⁰. «A person who freely swears to do something is bound by a special obligation of religion to fulfill what he or she firmed by oath»¹⁷¹.

The oaths can be separated into different types:

- a) *Assertory* or *promissory* oath. The assertive one has the aim of guaranteeing the truthfulness of past or present facts; on the other side, the promissory one concerns a future commitment to which God is invoked as guarantor.
- b) *Invocatory* or *execratory* oath. In the first one God is invoked as a witness, whereas in the second one God is also expressly invoked as the judge of the falseness or the infidelity.
- c) *Simple* or *solemn* oath. The solemn oath differs from the simple because it is taken during specific religious or civil ceremonies and is accompanied by some symbolic actions, such as placing the hand on the *Bible*.
- d) Oath with *direct invocation* or *indirect invocation* of God. In the indirect invocation, sacred or related-to-God realities are used, such as making an oath by the Cross or by Heaven.

A false oath or a perjury, which is a false promise made under oath, are acts that go severely against the virtue of religion.

2.4. The sins against the virtue of religion

One can sin against the virtue of religion either by omission, by not doing the religious acts that are owed to God and convenient to human nature, or by commission, that is to say to do acts that are objectively against the aims of the virtue of religion. It is common to divide these last ones into two major groups: those that stray away from the ultimate aim of

¹⁶⁶ *Code of Canon Law*, can 1196.

¹⁶⁷ *Code of Canon Law*, can 1197.

¹⁶⁸ *Code of Canon Law*, can 1199, § 1.

¹⁶⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2150.

¹⁷⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2155.

¹⁷¹ *Code of Canon Law*, can 1200, § 1.

the virtue of religion by excess and those that stray away from the ultimate aim of the virtue of religion by defect.

The vice that contrary to the virtue of religion by excess is called *superstition*, and through it one unduly divinizes something that in reality is not divine¹⁷². Superstition comprises idolatry, divination and magic.

On the other side, the vice that strays away from the ultimate aim of the virtue of religion by defect, thus consisting in not dealing with the owed respect and honour the divine or sacred realities, is called *irreligion*, and includes blasphemies, imprecations, sacrilege, simony and atheism.

Summarizing, it can be said that «[s]uperstition in some sense represents a perverse excess of religion; irreligion is the vice contrary by defect to the virtue of religion»¹⁷³.

2.4.1. The forms of superstition

«Superstition is a departure from the worship that we give to the true God. It is manifested in idolatry, as well as in various forms of divination and magic»¹⁷⁴.

Among the vices that are contrary to the virtue of religion by excess, there is, in the first place, *idolatry*. «Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc»¹⁷⁵. The Lord frequently admonished His people against this danger: «You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God» (Deut 5, 7-9). Also: «You shall make for yourself no idols and erect no graven image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land, to bow down to them; for I am the LORD your God» (Lev 26, 1).

In its essence «[i]dolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God»¹⁷⁶. In this line of thought, the Lord Jesus reminds us that: «No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other,

¹⁷² Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.94, a. 1, co.: «cuicumque creaturae divinus cultus exhibeatur, superstitiosum est».

¹⁷³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2110.

¹⁷⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2138.

¹⁷⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2113.

¹⁷⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2113.

or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon» (Matt 6, 24).

Idolatry can be divided into formal, when the will has the intention of paying cult to an idol, or material, when, for any reason, an act of idolatry with the external appearance of an idolatry cult is simulated. Likewise, material idolatry, which is obviously less pervert than formal idolatry, must be considered a grave sin, because, even though in this case the idolatry is not directly wanted by the will, a reasonable motive that renders it licit in certain circumstances has never been found. This happens whether because the honour owed to God is in fact the greatest of all goods, or because we have the divine precept of witnessing our faith with courage: «So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven» (Matt 10, 32-33).

Divination is the curious desire to know future or unknown events – which God alone can know – through the explicit or implicit aid of demons¹⁷⁷. According to Saint Thomas, the angels, good or bad, by their nature, have a certain dominion over material realities, can enlighten men with sensible images, acting upon their imagination and upon the other external and internal senses, and also to induce men to act in a certain direction by exciting their passions¹⁷⁸. They can also perform wondrous prodigies, but are powerless to perform true miracles¹⁷⁹.

Therefore, divination is an act that, by its nature, always requires a pact with demons and hence its especial graveness¹⁸⁰. Therefore, it does not wonder that God has repeatedly

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.95, a. 2, co.: «Omnis autem divinatio ex operatione Daemonum provenit, vel quia expresse Daemones invocantur ad futura manifestanda; vel quia Daemones se ingerunt vanis inquisitionibus futurorum, ut mentes hominum implicent vanitate»; ibidem, a. 3, co.: «omnis divinatio utitur ad praecognitionem futuri eventus aliquo Daemonum consilio et auxilio. Quod quidem vel expresse imploratur, vel praeter petitionem hominis, se occulte Daemon ingerit ad praenuntiandum quaedam futura quae hominibus sunt ignota, eis autem cognita».

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.110-111.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.110, a. 4, ad. 2: «miracula simpliciter loquendo, dicuntur, ut dictum est, cum aliqua fiunt praeter ordinem totius naturae creatae. Sed quia non omnis virtus naturae creatae est nota nobis, ideo cum aliquid fit praeter ordinem naturae creatae nobis notae, per virtutem creatam nobis ignotam, est miraculum quoad nos. Sic igitur cum Daemones aliquid faciunt sua virtute naturali, miracula dicuntur non simpliciter, sed quoad nos. Et hoc modo magi per Daemones miracula faciunt»; ibidem, q. 114 a. 4 co.: «si miraculum proprie accipitur, Daemones miracula facere non possunt, nec aliqua creatura, sed solus Deus, quia miraculum proprie dicitur quod fit praeter ordinem totius naturae creatae, sub quo ordine continetur omnis virtus creaturae. Dicitur tamen quandoque miraculum large, quod excedit humanam facultatem et considerationem. Et sic Daemones possunt facere miracula, quae scilicet homines mirantur, inquantum eorum facultatem et cognitionem excedunt. Nam et unus homo, inquantum facit aliquid quod est supra facultatem et cognitionem alterius, ducit alium in admirationem sui operis, ut quodammodo miraculum videatur operari. Sciendum est tamen quod, quamvis huiusmodi opera Daemonum, quae nobis miracula videntur, ad veram rationem miraculi non pertingant; sunt tamen quandoque verae res. Sicut magi Pharaonis per virtutem Daemonum veros serpentes et ranas fecerunt».

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.95, a. 2, ad. 2: «divinatio pertinet ad cultum Daemonum, inquantum aliquis utitur quodam pacto tacito vel expreso cum Daemonibus»; ibidem, q. 96, a. 1,

warned His people regarding this matter: «Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God» (Lev 19, 31); «A man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death; they shall be stoned with stones, their blood shall be upon them» (Lev 20, 27); «When you come into the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD; and because of these abominable practices the LORD your God is driving them out before you» (Deut 18, 9-12); «Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against sorcerers» (Mal 3, 5);

Saint Thomas divides divination into various types within two major groups, differing one from the other in what concerns the existence or not of an explicit invocation of demons. Whenever there is an explicit invocation of demons, the divination can be done through apparitions or voices that resemble human voices (*praestigium*), through dreams (*divinatio somniorum*), by invoking the dead (*nigromantia*), through mediums (*pythones*)¹⁸¹, through the interpretation of signs that appear in inanimate things (*geomantia*), or in the air (*aeromantia*), or in the water (*hidromantia*), or in the fire (*piromantia*), or in the guts of animals that have been immolated to demons (*aruspicium*). Whenever there is not an explicit invocation of demons, divination is done through means of the interpretation of the movement of celestial bodies (*astrologia*), birds' behaviour (*augurium*), presages said by people (*omen*), through the figural disposition of observed bodies (*figura*), the reading of the lines of the palm of the hand (*chiromantia*), interpretation of the backs of some animals (*spatulimantia*), the casual disposition of certain objects (*sortes*)¹⁸².

ad. 3: «exquirere cognitionem futurorum a Daemonibus non solum est peccatum propter hoc quod ipsi futura non cognoscunt, sed propter societatem cum eis initam».

¹⁸¹ Cf. Acts 16, 16.

¹⁸² Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.95, a. 3, co.: « omnis divinatio utitur ad praecognitionem futuri eventus aliquo Daemonum consilio et auxilio. Quod quidem vel expresse imploratur, vel praeter petitionem hominis, se occulte Daemon ingerit ad praenuntiandum quaedam futura quae hominibus sunt ignota, eis autem cognita per modos de quibus in primo dictum est. Daemones autem expresse invocati solent futura praenuntiare multiplicitur. Quandoque quidem praestigiosis quibusdam apparitionibus se aspectui et auditui hominum ingerentes ad praenuntiandum futura. Et haec species vocatur praestigium, ex eo quod oculi hominum praestringuntur. Quandoque autem per somnia. Et haec vocatur divinatio somniorum. Quandoque vero per mortuorum aliquorum apparitionem vel locutionem. Et haec species vocatur nigromantia, quia, ut Isidorus dicit, in libro Etymol., nigrum Graece mortuus, mantia divinatio nuncupatur, quia quibusdam praecantationibus, adhibito sanguine, videntur resuscitati mortui divinare et ad interrogata respondere. Quandoque vero futura praenuntiant per homines vivos, sicut in arreptitiis patet. Et haec est divinatio per Pythones, et ut Isidorus dicit, Pythones a Python Apolline sunt dicti, qui dicebatur esse auctor divinandi. Quandoque vero futura praenuntiant per aliquas figuras vel signa quae in rebus inanimatis apparent. Quae quidem si appareant in aliquo corpore terrestri, puta in ligno vel ferro aut lapide polito, vocatur geomantia; si autem in aqua, hydromantia; si autem in aere, aeromantia; si autem in igne, pyromantia; si autem in visceribus animalium immolatorum in aris Daemonum, vocatur aruspicium. Divinatio autem quae fit absque expressa Daemonum invocatione, in duo genera dividitur. Quorum primum est cum ad praenosendum futura aliquid consideramus in dispositionibus aliquarum rerum. Et si quidem aliquis conetur

With a less detailed analysis, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* simply declares that «[a]ll forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to "unveil" the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone»¹⁸³.

Lastly, superstition can also be found in *magic*. Magic consists in the attempt to achieve certain effects by means of doing something that, by itself, does not have the natural capability of achieving the desired effect and, therefore, such action is accompanied by an illicit request for help, either explicit or implicit, addressed to demons¹⁸⁴. Usually, one distinguishes between dark magic, in which one seeks to hurt someone, and white magic, in which a good effect is sought. In any case, magic presents itself as being highly immoral because it implies, as in the case of divination, an implicit or explicit pact with demons¹⁸⁵.

futura praenoscere ex consideratione situs et motus siderum, hoc pertinet ad astrologos; qui et geneatici dicuntur, propter natalium considerationes dierum. Si vero per motus vel voces avium, seu quorumcumque animalium; sive per sternutationes hominum, vel membrorum saltus; hoc pertinet generaliter ad augurium, quod dicitur a garritu avium, sicut auspiciu ab inspectione avium, quorum primum pertinet ad aures, secundum ad oculos; in avibus enim huiusmodi praecipue considerari solent. Si vero huiusmodi consideratio fiat circa verba hominum alia intentione dicta, quae quis retorquet ad futurum quod vult praenoscere, hoc vocatur omen. Et sic ut maximus Valerius dicit, ominum observation aliquo contractu religioni innexa est. Quoniam non fortuito motu, sed divina providentia constare creditur quae fecit, ut, Romanis deliberantibus utrum ad alium locum migrarent, forte eo tempore centurio quidam exclamavit, signifer, statue signum, hic optime manebimus; quam vocem auditam pro omine acceperunt, transeundi consilium omittentes. Si autem considerentur aliquae dispositiones figurarum in aliquibus corporibus visui occurrentes, erit alia divinationis species. Nam ex lineamentis manus consideratis divinatio sumpta chiromantia vocatur, quasi divinatio manus, chiros enim Graece dicitur manus. Divinatio vero ex quibusdam figuris in spatula alicuius animalis apparentibus, spatulimantia vocatur. Ad secundum autem divinationis genus quae est sine expressa Daemonum invocatione, pertinet divinatio quae fit ex consideratione eorum quae eveniunt ex quibusdam quae ab hominibus serio fiunt ad aliquid occultum inquirendum, sive per protractionem punctorum (quod pertinet ad artem geomantiae); sive per considerationem figurarum quae proveniunt ex plumbo liquefatto in aquam proiecto; sive ex quibusdam cedulis, scriptis vel non scriptis, in occulto repositis, dum consideratur quis quam accipiat; vel etiam ex festucis inaequalibus propositis, quis maiorem vel minorem accipiat; vel etiam ex taxillorum projectione, quis plura puncta proiciat; vel etiam dum consideratur quid aperienti librum occurrat. Quae omnia sortium nomen habent. Sic igitur patet triplex esse divinationis genus. Quorum primum est per manifestam Daemonum invocationem, quod pertinet ad nigromanticos. Secundum autem est per solam considerationem dispositionis vel motus alterius rei, quod pertinet ad augures. Tertium est dum facimus aliquid ut nobis manifestetur aliquid occultum, quod pertinet ad sortes. Sub quolibet autem horum multa continentur, ut patet ex dictis».

¹⁸³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2116.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.96, a. 2, ad. 1: «si simpliciter adhibeantur res naturales ad aliquos effectus producendos ad quos putantur naturalem habere virtutem, non est superstitiosum neque illicitum. Si vero adiungantur vel characters aliqui, vel aliqua nomina, vel aliae quaecumque variae observationes, quae manifestum est naturaliter efficaciam non habere, erit superstitiosum et illicitum»; ibidem, ad 3: «nullo modo licet homini Daemonum auxilio uti per pacta tacita vel expressa»; ibidem, I, q. 110, a. 4, ad 2: «cum magus aliquid facit per pactum initum cum Daemone, hoc fit quasi per quendam privatum contractum».

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 3, cap. 105, n. 6: «Relinquitur igitur quod effectus huiusmodi compleantur per aliquem intellectum ad quem sermo proferentis huiusmodi voces dirigitur. Huius

Linked to magic, one finds the use of charms, that is the use of certain objects considered as capable of producing certain beneficial effects, but for which they have no natural capability¹⁸⁶.

The Church, true interpreter of the Word of God, teaches that «[a]ll practices of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others - even if this were for the sake of restoring their health - are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion»¹⁸⁷, and that «[w]earing charms is also reprehensible. Spiritism often implies divination or magical practices»¹⁸⁸.

2.4.2. The forms of irreligion

One can sin against the virtue of religion by defect whenever one does not give the honour owed to God or to the sacred things. This is what the vice of irreligion, which may assume various forms, consists of¹⁸⁹.

A first form of irreligion is *blasphemy*. Blasphemy «consists in uttering against God - inwardly or outwardly - words of hatred, reproach, or defiance; in speaking ill of God; in failing in respect toward him in one's speech; in misusing God's name»¹⁹⁰. It always implies not to treat with the owed respect – to profane – the divine things. It is seen, for example, in «the use of the name of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Virgin Mary, and of the saints in an offensive way»¹⁹¹. By its intrinsic nature, blasphemy always implies a grave act against the virtue of charity and of religion and therefore it must be stated that it is always (*ex toto genere suo*) a grave sin, even when its immediate cause is anger or despair. «He who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death» (Lev 24, 16).

Differing from blasphemy, there are the *oaths*. «Oaths which misuse God's name, though without the intention of blasphemy, show lack of respect for the Lord»¹⁹². They concern inopportune invocations of the Name of God that damage the honour and the respect owed to Him.

The *curses*, through which one desires the evil for someone involving in some way the Name of God, are also acts of irreligion. These pretend to associate divine omnipotence to our bad intentions concerning our neighbour, and are usually moved by the desire of revenge or envy.

autem signum est: nam huiusmodi significativae voces quibus magi utuntur, invocationes sunt, supplicationes, adiurationes, aut etiam imperia, quasi ad alterum colloquentis»; Ibidem, *De Potentia*, q. 6, a. 10.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.96, a. 4.

¹⁸⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2117.

¹⁸⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2117.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2139.

¹⁹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2148.

¹⁹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2162.

¹⁹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2149.

Another form of irreligion is to doubt or to test the divine attributes. This is what we call *tempting God*¹⁹³. Such act is against the virtue of religion because it implies to doubt the divine excellency, which is a lack of respect toward God¹⁹⁴. However, when one puts God to the test, for example, asking for His help in a moment of need, moved not by mistrust on His kindness but rather by a right intention, then such act is not in any way a form of irreligion, but an act of virtue. This means that not all the pleas for divine intervention consist in tempting God. «Tempting God consists in putting his goodness and almighty power to the test by word or deed»¹⁹⁵.

Sacrilege is also a form of irreligion. It «consists in profaning or treating unworthily the sacraments and other liturgical actions, as well as persons, things, or places consecrated to God. Sacrilege is a grave sin especially when committed against the Eucharist, for in this sacrament the true Body of Christ is made substantially present for us»¹⁹⁶, and always implies a lack of respect toward what is in anyway sacred. It was not for no reason that Jesus, moved by a fair indignation, rebuked and expelled those tradesmen who were desecrating the house of His Father (cf. John 2, 14; Matt 21, 12).

Simony is also an act of irreligion whose name comes from Simon, *the magician*, who tried to buy from the Apostles the power of bestowing the Holy Spirit through the imposition of the hands (cf. Acts 8, 18-24). «Simony is defined as the buying or selling of spiritual things»¹⁹⁷. The spiritual realities are not objects for trading, but rather gifts from God, and, even though they might be in the possession of the ministers of God, these ministers are not their owners, but only their administrators (cf. 1 Cor 4, 1). Hence Jesus urges them: «You have received without pay, give without pay» (Matt 10, 8). The pretension of wanting to buy spiritual realities mistakenly assumes that one could pay anything with value equivalent to them. Such an attitude would turn the ministers of God into merchants of the gifts of God, such trading being an offence to the honour owed to the Creator. The gifts of God are gifts that have to be accepted as such and move us into gratitude and praise: «What shall I render to the LORD for all his bounty to me? [...] I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD» (Ps 115, 12.17). At the same time, they are gifts from God and, therefore, the ministers who hold them in their power should always bear in mind that such gifts are not their property¹⁹⁸. This is not contrary to the fact that the sacred ministers may receive offers from the faithful on the occasion of the sacred gifts that they receive by means of their ministry. Such offers are not aimed at «buying» the gifts of God, but simply at helping to sustain those who consecrate their

¹⁹³ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.97, a. 2, co.: «tentare est experimentum sumere. Nullus autem experimentum sumit de eo de quo est certus».

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.97, a. 3, co.: «tentare aliquem ad irreverentiam eius pertinet, nullus enim praesumit tentare eum de cuius excellentia certus est».

¹⁹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2119.

¹⁹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2120.

¹⁹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2121.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas (Saint), *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.100, a. 1, ad. 1: «in hoc quod aliquis vendit donum spiritus sancti, quodammodo se protestatur esse dominum spiritualis doni; quod est haereticum».

existence into being dispensers of those gifts for the welfare of their brothers. The Lord himself reminds that «the labourer deserves his wages» (Luke 10, 7), and Saint Paul says that «in the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel» (1 Cor 9, 14). It is in this line of thought that the Church teaches that the faithful have the duty of supporting their sacred ministers¹⁹⁹.

To conclude, there is the *atheism*, which presents itself as an attitude of non-recognition of the existence of the Creator and, therefore, «since it rejects or denies the existence of God, atheism is a sin against the virtue of religion»²⁰⁰. More specifically, it must be said that it is a form of irreligion. Among those who have such an existential disposition we find both those by whom «God is expressly denied»²⁰¹, and those that, though they do not deny Him explicitly, end up denying Him in their daily lives, living as if God in fact did not exist²⁰². It is worth mentioning that in the western cultural environment the phenomenon of atheism, theoretical or practical, has notably spread; however, «taken as a whole, atheism is not a spontaneous development»²⁰³. Man, as we have mentioned above, thanks to the natural light of reason, is a religious being and, therefore, is not atheist by nature. This is the reason why it can be said that «undeniably, those who willfully shut out God from their hearts and try to dodge religious questions are not following the dictates of their conscience [...] are not free of blame»²⁰⁴.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 222, §1.

²⁰⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2125.

²⁰¹ II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 19.

²⁰² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2124: «The name "atheism" covers many very different phenomena. One common form is the practical materialism which restricts its needs and aspirations to space and time».

²⁰³ II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 19.

²⁰⁴ II Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 19.

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Index

Foreword.....	1
Introduction.....	2
1. Do demons exist?.....	3
2. Why do some christians deny the existence of the devil?.....	3
3. Can Satan cause any evil he wants?.....	3
4. What is the greatest evil that demons can cause?.....	3
5. With what sins does the devil take more people into hell?.....	3
6. How does one tell if a certain behavior is superstitious or not?.....	4
7. Can a christian resort to mediums, witch doctors, wizards or spiritual centers to ask for help?.....	4
8. What forms of divination exist?.....	5
9. Nowadays, what is the position of the Catholic Church?.....	5
10. Being so, can't a christian resort to magic to achieve good things, such as the healing of an illness, the reestablishment of peace in a matrimony, to find a job or to have a child?.....	6
11. Can a christian use charms?.....	6
12. Can a christian resort to astrology?.....	6
13. Can a christian resort to Tarot?.....	6
14. Can a christian practice reiki?.....	7
15. Can a Christian practice yoga?.....	7
16. Can a christian resort to acupuncture?.....	7
17. Can a christian resort to homeopathy?.....	7
18. Can a christian resort to an enneagram?.....	8
19. Can a christian belong to the Masonry?.....	8
20. Why does the Church condemn Masonry so much?.....	8
21. How does Masonry have so much power?.....	9
22. Can a christian hear any kind of music?.....	9
23. Is the devil the instigator of all our sins and the cause of all evils?.....	9

24. Has Jesus Christ already defeated the Devil and his angels?.....	9
25. What types of actions do demons exert in the world?.....	10
26. What kind of natural capabilities do demons and angels have?.....	10
27. Can demons operate true miracles?.....	10
28. What is parapsychology?.....	10
29. Can demons possess people?.....	11
30. What signs may indicate the presence of disorders of diabolical cause?	11
31. What is a malefice?.....	11
32. How can a malefice be destroyed?.....	12
33. How can we defend ourselves from diabolic attacks?.....	12
34. What is an exorcism?.....	12
35. Where does the power to exorcise demons come from?.....	13
36. Are the faithful allowed to pray the little exorcism of Pope Leo XIII?.....	13
37. What is a prayer of deliverance?.....	13
38. In the case of people presenting a light diabolical disorder, should a priest pray the prayers of deliverance, even if he is not an exorcist?.....	13
39. Can the faithful pray a prayer of deliverance?.....	14
40. What is the purpose of a prayer of deliverance and to what extent is it effective?.....	14
Attachments.....	15
I) Prayer of Liberation.....	15
II) «Render to God the things that are God's» (Matt 22, 21). The moral virtue of religion.....	20
III) Recommended contemporaneous bibliography.....	46