



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

Website: elephantsinthelivingroom.org



REV. RICHARD ROHR
THE WORLD, THE FLESH AND THE DEVIL
IBEW HALL
DETROIT, MI
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2018

The Spiral of Violence: The World, the Flesh and the Devil

Rev. Richard Rohr

Thank you for your patience; and thank you, Bishop Gumbleton, for such a kind introduction. I suggested this title, “The World, the Flesh and the Devil.” I’m sure it sounds rather exalted. I’ll be perfectly honest with you. I suggested this. This is something I teach in our school here; but I teach it at the very end of the class, because it takes mature students to be ready for it. So, I’m trusting that you are a mature student. *(laughter)*



And frankly, what’s happening in our country, that we can have this much education in our universities and in our schools, and still have our government in such disarray, that Catholics after centuries of sincere Christianity could have a pedophilia scandal? We have to be asking, “What is the nature of the evil? Why does it continue to persist despite our best efforts to move beyond it?” We think, “Well, we’ve captured evil, and we’ve named it as sin.” But yet, these sins appear three times in John’s Gospel, that Satan is the prince of this world. Now, what did he mean by that?

Well, let me give you an explanation that I hope will make sense to you. It sure helps our students. And I'm relying on moral theology courses I had back in the late 60s, where I was taught there were three sources of evil: the World, the Flesh and the Devil – and in that order – the World, the Flesh and the Devil. And we're going to explain each one of these.

The Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, Dom Helder Camera, he used this in describing the spiral of violence. If you don't go to the bottom, at the lowest level, it continues to be inevitable. So, let's start with "the World."

The World



I am going to give you a different word that sometimes people think of the world as nature/creation; and nothing could be further from the truth. I'm not talking about nature or creation. When I talk about the term, "the World," this is how John's Gospel uses it. Let's just use the word, "the System."

Now, until the 1960s, when I was studying here in Southfield, we did not have much awareness of structural sin, institutional evil. We just looked at sin at the personal level. And people came and confessed their personal sins. That's the second level – "the Flesh." But when sin is recognized at the first level – "the World, the System," then evil and sin at the first level is certain.

Now, if you'll stay with me, I'll eventually get to the third level, and we'll describe what we mean by the Devil. And let me assure you, I'm not talking about the little red guy with the pitched fork holding his tail, swirling it around. So, let's get back to "the world."

Every organization, institution, nation-state organizes itself to survive. It organizes itself to succeed, to look good. So, it has to be self-referential; it has to be self-protective. I mean, look at the insurance policies we all have to have. An institution, as an institution, has to sort of hide itself from the shadows. It can't admit its own faults. That's what God allows us to do. For the sake of the group, for the sake of the nation, for the sake of the Church, you look the other way. Let me give you examples what I mean by the system. I'm not saying individual people are the problem. I'm saying there's a structural "I" at work – the penal system, the health care system, as General Eisenhower said, the military industrial complex, and we have to admit, even the Church system.

It's no accident that in Mark's Gospel the first demon is found in the synagogue. That's very telling. And religion itself, when it becomes an end in itself, cannot achieve a high level of consciousness. Let's just leave it at that. It has to be self-



maintaining, self-perpetuating, self-validating. You have to have element drives and good PR. And those of us, I'm sure, who are religious in the room, you all know that our order usually becomes quite comfortable. I know that's true.

The individual nun or friar might have taken a vow of poverty, but to survive, most of our provinces/monasteries have endowments to the tune of millions of dollars. I'm not saying that's evil; but I am saying it makes one part of the system.

The sisters' communities have been much better in this than the guys in recognizing not to invest in unjust corporations.

But we didn't even have the language for structural institutional people until Pope John Paul II started using it. He popularized the language in the 1980s. But you and I—it looks like most of you in my age group, I'm 75; some of you are younger—certainly, we are in the second half of life. We have no training to recognize evil in the world.

Let me give you an example: war is good! But when we go out individually and murder people is bad. We're killing people for America. This is virtuous; and we deny, in fact, that it's murder. "No, it isn't murder if it's for America." I just wanted to give you that example of how we've agreed it is an evil and try to manage it at the personal level. We're basically schizophrenic. So, let's call it "deny and disguise evil" —deny and disguise. You sort of look the other way.

Or, let's take capitalism. We all know that we're not supposed to be greedy; we're not supposed to be glutinous; but, in fact, inside capitalism, that's sort of a virtue. I always say, "I've never heard a sermon in my life against the 10th Commandment – Thou shall not covet thy neighbors' goods." We wouldn't think of preaching against the 10th Commandment; it keeps the economy going, looking forward to Black Friday —we want more things we don't need. We've been lied to in that regard.

The Flesh

At the systemic level, evil is defined as the World. At the second level, this spiral unfolds as the Flesh. Now that's your individual sinfulness: your individual nastiness, eccentricity, stupidity. There we put all that to our tension. Of all the things you've ever heard, "I've told you not to be a bad person; be moral, obey the Ten Commandments." And evangelical preachers give us "fire and brimstone" talks to make you feel bad or sinful. And, I guess, we Catholics do that too, because we've become co-dependent on the Church.

We, first of all, make sure you feel sinful; then you've got to keep coming back, for Confession, first Communion, and whatever else. I'm not saying that's one's intention; that's the way it works.

So, just know that we've concentrated just on the middle level: "the Flesh." We use that word, "the Flesh," unfortunately from St. Paul. If I could change one thing in St. Paul, I'd tell him, "Why did he make the word, 'Flesh,' something bad?" When you go to John's Gospel, "The Word became flesh." So, flesh can be a bad thing; but, unfortunately, Paul defined Flesh in contradiction to Spirit. And I can't forgive him for doing that, (laughter) because it's supposed to be an incarnational religion that believes in embodiment, physicality, interiority. But, at any rate, Paul uses that word to describe individual selfishness.

Now, so here's the spiral of the World. If you don't nip it in the bud there, it moves into the Flesh. Still, you're compulsive about it; but you don't have any power over it, because, at the collective level, it's agreed upon not to be a sin. So, as I have told you, Paul uses pre-modern words: the Powers, the Principalities, the Thrones, the Dominations, the Spirits—stay with me; don't get tired now—this is heavy. But, if you get the basic paradigm, it's going to explain a lot of things, I promise you.

The Devil

So, if the World is denied evil, the Devil is sanctified evil. The phrase we started using in 2008 was "too big to fail." Anything that is above criticism, anything that cannot be questioned, these are the sanctified organizations, institutions, movements: the banking system, the healthcare system. But now, how do we imagine living without their systems? We can't imagine living without the banking system. I'm not saying they're demonic; but I'm saying, those above criticism will soon be demonic. And it's hard to capture, because it's too big to fail. It's romanticized; it's sanctified.

Let's take a city, for example. I haven't lived in a city in the world where the city square doesn't honor a veterans' betterment day, or a war monument. Why don't we honor teachers? (applause) Sincerely! Sincerely! Why always do we have to idealize people who fought wars? If any of you are veterans, I'm not trying to put you down. But we have to romanticize the whole thing of war to get young men to keep offering their bodies and their lives to be heroes for killing in the name of the country.

All I'm trying to do in this oversimplified example is to show you the complexion of what we're dealing with when we call Evil, evil; and why we can't seem to get control of it. Because, it is totally let loose at the first level, and at the third level.

We never point to the World, the System; we never point to the demonization or angelization—both words are true—of most systems.

I was jail chaplain here in Albuquerque for fourteen years. And once I got in and worked there regularly, I recognized that 90% of the employees in the jail had not the least interest—and I'm not exaggerating—in helping these prisoners. They liked the power, the differential they had. They had all the power; the prisoners had none. They threw their power around. That's called the penal system. None of us can imagine living without prisons or jails. But, maybe—this is what I'm saying—these big, too big to fail corporations, organizations, movements, take on a life of their own that is above criticism.

Really! I guess Paul would say, "They take on a death of their own." In his Letter to the Romans, he calls it the "sin system". You know, if you could go back and meet Paul—I'm writing a book on this now—he is hardly ever referring to the Flesh. He's always talking about all three of them together; and the "sin system" is his recognition that the whole world is trapped inside the tragic, the deceitful world view.

Now, what the preaching of the Gospel hopes to do is liberate you from that enthrallment. You can't get out from under it. You still need the banking system, the penal system, the health care system, the military-industrial complex. I guess they're not going to go away; but you better stop being naive about them.

And up to now, we were allowed to be very naive about how well evil was agreed upon as good. You know, Thomas Aquinas said that the only way evil can succeed is that it has to appear as good. C.S. Lewis said the same thing: it has to disguise itself as good. So, I'm sure, on some ridiculous level, our President thinks what he is doing is good. So, you can see why the basic preaching of the Gospel is to break you through the illusion. People are blind—let me say it this way—people are blind before they are malicious. I don't think people start by being malicious. They're just fooled. They buy the System lock, stock and barrel. They thought America was beyond criticism. Let's be honest; we all thought the Catholic Church was beyond criticism. Anything that is beyond criticism will soon show its demonic face. I am going to say that as a certitude.

Now Paul describes it as spirits in the air. In other words, you can't grab 'em because they're everywhere; they're invisible. They're agreed upon; and so, you don't question them anymore. They're invisible agreement. So, all the Gospel can really do is enlighten you. So, you withdraw some of your allegiance. I don't think any of us feels free from evil. I mean, I guess you drove here from wherever you were at this morning; which means you added to the "carbon footprint." (laughter) I've flown all over the world; so, I've really added to the carbon footprint.

Now we're recognizing things like "white privilege;" when you still even use that word, "white privilege," most white folks bristle. That's what I mean by "spirits in the air." You can't see them, because we've been living with them for so long, we take it for granted. We white males, and then you add to that, ordination, you add to that American;

I mean, here I am, supposed to be Franciscan. I am the elite, of the elite, of the elite. That's "white privilege." But you have to expose that.

We had a meeting here last week for our whole staff on white privilege. No one left the room. We see it's everywhere; but we take it for granted. Those are the things that can become demonic.

So, I hope you hear that I'm using the word, demonic, in a different way. But, I think as a rule, I remember, as I was studying theology, I asked my professor—I was down in Dayton, Ohio—"Do we believe in a physical Devil?" And he waited a moment, and he said, "Well, let me just answer this way. Every great magician in the world has found it necessary to personify evil. Buddhists even do this. You go to temples throughout in Asia; there is evil spirits," he said; "Here's what's happening: you don't take things seriously until you personify them." And the reason we've made out this little character is, frankly, to take him seriously.

In other words, it's complex; it's a coming together of attitude and ideas that trap us. And, if you don't have spiritual eyes, you don't see it.

Now, it shouldn't surprise you, but I think that little children, even dogs – I know my dog wouldn't mind my saying this; I'm a dog lover – and, at times, even uneducated people can sense evil. They see right through a person. They see that person is a phony; that person is lying; that person has a cold heart. I know my dog will literally back away. It's almost like we're educated not to see common sense. And given the politics of this country – this isn't hard to prove – it seems that 40% of the country cannot perceive evil. We're in trouble! In fact, they think evil is wonderful. And, I'm sure, the bishops who covered up the pedophiles, they thought what they were doing was virtuous.

So, when lies are concealed truth in favor of organizations; but individually, we shouldn't tell lies. You catch the schizophrenia? We call things evil we don't believe are evil. You could take all seven capital sins.

The seven capital sins have been glorified, legitimized and validated at the corporate level, then, used at the individual level.

So, we gather and talk about a lot of personal guilt, about how terrible you were; but we didn't realize that the world and the Devil had gotten off scot free, that we didn't point to those as equally, or if not more so, the sources of evil that surround us. So, again, they're hidden agreements.

So, if you have a good spiritual director—you know, you had some good ones in the early 60s—what they could do is teach you, what the Jesuits called, the charism of discernment. It's movement beyond the black and the white; the Law, telling you what to do, or what not to do. That doesn't get you very far, which is why Paul criticizes the Law. Discernment opens up all those degrees between totally bad and totally good people. And I think we have to recognize that we are not totally good people either. The best things I've ever done have been for mixed motives. And, I have to say, you all look like lovely, totally holy Catholic people. (laughter) The best things you've ever done have still been for mixed motives.

I think that's what our Catholic faith means by "weeping over our sins." The older I get, the more I see my own shadow, my own dark side, my own mixed motives, my own inability to love, my own ability to age. I see it every day. I see why the saints call it "weeping over our sins."

So, I don't think we want to, almost want to, open up that World between totally good and totally bad, because that's all of us. We are all part of the World; we are all part of the Flesh; and we are all part of the Devil.

But, I hope this little morality course, terribly oversimplified—I take a whole day to give this to the students. We'll stir some questions for you that will allow us to understand evil in a much more helpful way. Let's be honest. Whatever way we've described it up to now, it sure doesn't seem to be working. (laughter)

How can there be so much evil at every level of our society; and, more and more, we don't call it evil? We call it fun, or entertainment, or, I mean, we tolerate it. Forgive me; I'm being too political, I guess. We tolerate a President who tells a minimum of ten lies a day. I'm not convicting him, but the people who think so little of themselves to tolerate it. What does this say about the moral fiber of our country? We really don't care that we are being lied to. The only remaining philosophy in America – remember Descartes: "I think; therefore, I am" – America now is: "I win; therefore, I am." It's all about winning; which is why we spend so much for sports stadiums.

Let me draw together on that. The World, Paul call it the principles of this world, are entirely based on retributive justice: quid pro quo, tit for tat, winners and losers. I remember as a young priest, teaching in Cincinnati, and I was talking at a Catholic businessmen's breakfast. And I said to these good, successful, Catholic men, "What if the Gospel is win-win?" And there was a puzzled look on almost all of their faces. And at the break, one of the businessmen in his suit came up and thumped his fingers on the pulpit; and he said in a patronizing way, "Father, win-win, that wouldn't even be interesting." That wouldn't even be interesting! See, I'm convinced that's the Gospel. God wins and we win. What else could God do? That's the only way God is victorious.

But we like to think reality in terms of winners/losers. There have to be losers for others to win. There have to be!

And so, we've created an entire society, where we have marginalized groups, who we convene as inferior, unworthy: poor people, handicap people, gay people, black people, Mexican people. And, of course, who sits at the top? We nice white people, who define ourselves as normal. So, thank God!

About 20 years ago, we discovered a word that's used a lot with a Jewish prophet. If you want to check this out after you leave here, read Ezekiel 16. At the end of Ezekiel 16, after threatening the people of Israel—and that's all it is; it's a threat—"This is the final way I am going to restore you. I am going to restore you by my love. I am going to restore you by my face. I am going to restore you by my goodness." So, we find in the 20th century, we discovered restorative justice. God does not achieve God's purposes by punishment, but by making things be what they really are. How else could God achieve justification? It's the way you raise your children. You grow them to maturity.

So, let me say it this way. When we move from retributive justice to restorative justice, I think we begin to swim in the ocean of the Gospels. It's not win or lose; it's win-win. And your deepest Christian heart already knows that's true. Show me where Jesus punished anybody – anybody! Jesus wasn't into punishing people. He made them to be responsible, but not punishing.

So I think, and I don't think this is an exaggeration, you can disagree with me, but I think we're still in baby Christianity. I think we're still in the infancy period. 2000 years after the incarnation of God in Christ, we're still just beginning to get the monumental character of the Christian revelation.

My book, coming out next March—not that I am here to push a book - it's on the Universal Christ. And I don't think most of us here have been told about the Universal Christ. We know about Jesus, but most people think that Christ is Jesus' last name. They do! (laughter) They don't know that Christ existed from all eternity; and the Stone Age people, the Mayans, and the Babylonians, and the Egyptians, and the Syrians, and the barbarians, all had access to the Christ since the beginning of time.

God didn't just start talking 2000 years ago. If God just started talking 2000 years ago, that means God had nothing to say for 13.7 billion years - billion (laughter) I didn't say million; I said billion.

So, we have to have a God that is at least as big as the universe. We now know that the Earth is at least 13.7 billion years since the Big Bang, which I would call the Manifestation.

We Franciscans call the Bible, the first Bible was Creation. The first Bible is ancient. The first Bible is the Universe. And the second Bible, written in a mere nano-second of recent time. So, I wanted to put that into perspective to let you know how much we have to grow today in order to understand the logic of evil, but also the understanding of good, that goodness and grace are a corporate concept, beginning with the Big Bang. And, I think, evil and sin are a corporate concept.

You can't carry the burden of sin by yourself; we are sinful—you get it? You can't carry the weight of glory by yourself. We are the Body of Christ; but you don't know individually to be all of Christ. I carry one little gift; you carry another gift.

We are each part of a bigger mystery of the goodness of God and the sinfulness of humanity, if you want to use that word.

Transcribed by Tom Kyle
2018—11/25