

Aleteia

The Devil in the Details of Everyday Life



Great saints and martyrs learned how to do battle with Satan on the field of their daily life.

“The devil went down to Georgia. He was lookin’ for a soul to steal.”

But he didn’t stop there, of course. In May, he made an appearance at Harvard — a trip that’s usually good for some choice morsels — but he actually ended up losing a few souls that had been within his grasp. Bad enough that the celebratory Black Mass fizzled out. Worse, a local church was S.R.O. with “Catholics” adoring his sworn enemy.

Fortunately for Satan, the enemy’s followers were aglow from spoiling his big night and from the “grace” of Adoration. They’re now convinced he’s

back in the netherworld and give him scarcely a thought. They never even see him coming.

That's a mistake C.S. Lewis tried to keep us from making. In fact, he wrote a sort of playbook that lays out Satan's tactics: *The Screwtape Letters*. Written in 1939, when the bombs started falling in Britain, Lewis tried to warn his countrymen that there's one enemy of Christians even worse than the Nazis. (For this, he received scathing criticism.)

The book is an exchange of letters between a young devil-in-training named Wormwood and his "supervising" Satanic uncle (Screwtape). Wormwood delights at the declaration of war, hoping that killing, rape, destruction, and evil of all kinds will ensue.

Screwtape rebukes him sharply. Wars, he explains, are also opportunities for heroism and self-sacrifice. They can be a catalyst for many men and women to save their souls.

When I told you not to fill your letters with rubbish about the war, I meant, of course, that I did not want to have your rather infantile rhapsodies about the death of men and the destruction of cities. In so far as a war really concerns the spiritual state of the patient, I naturally want full reports.

Now that it is certain the German humans will bombard your patient's town and that his duties will keep him in the thick of danger, we must consider our policy. Are we to aim at cowardice — or at courage, with subsequent pride, or at hatred of the Germans. (Letter 28, Screwtape to Wormwood)

How about us? Do we spend our days thinking about how we'd correct the evils in the world or do we try to develop compunction and contrition for our own failures?

The Screwtape Letters presents many of the smaller battles in daily life that ultimately may matter more for our salvation than great campaigns against global evils.

Screwtape suggests that turning Christians against each other on moral issues is a great way to stir up pride — a cardinal sin. It's possible for Christians to be "correct" in their moral stance but "sinners in pride" because they are being sanctimonious, hypocritical, or prideful. And Satan knows what comes before a Fall, doesn't he?

Maybe it's better to meditate on one's failure to be a truly supportive spouse rather than constantly carping about the gay agenda? Or better to quell one's own anger when it's about to erupt than to lament the evils of terrorism? This list of priorities can, of course, be individualized about six billion ways. I'm sure that, with a little thought, you can create your own list.

Great saints and martyrs are people who became very skilled at fighting Satan. The place of combat isn't a battlefield or a coliseum; it's wherever you are in your daily life.

First, remember that your eternal salvation is priority number one. Everything else follows from this. A recent article in *Aleteia* reminded readers how easily sin can be downplayed, even forgotten. C.S. Lewis is unapologetic about the priority that should be given to the "supernatural" aspects of Christian faith. So was psychiatrist Krl Menninger, who authored *Whatever Became of Sin* while Lewis was writing about *Screwtape*. Even small sins are important:

You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is to the extent to which you separate the man from the enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is not better than cards, if cards will do the trick. (Letter 11, *Screwtape to Wormwood*)

Second, beware of ideologies or moral causes that make Christians fight against each other. In his time, Lewis pointed out the rancor between pacifists and those who were giving their lives for their country. How could pacifists be Christians—it is obvious they were cowards, so many of the faithful thought. One wonders what issues Lewis would single out in our time that have this same effect? (Stop now and wonder, too.)

"A nation divided among itself can not stand." This comes not from Lincoln, but the Old Testament.

By focusing on a few big issues, humans may forget other important ones: *The contemptuous way in which you spoke of gluttony as a means of catching souls in your last letter only shows your ignorance. One of the*

great achievements of the last hundred years has been to deaden the human conscience on that subject, so that by now you will hardly find a sermon preached or conscience troubled about it in the whole length and breadth of Europe. (Letter 17, Screwtape to Wormwood)

Are there lessons to learn when a pundit calls food “the New Sex,” when people in commercials boast of being “foodies,” and when America’s obesity epidemic is news to no one?

Third, Screwtape instructs Wormwood to focus Christians on their own inner feelings and preferences rather than the priorities and facts of the faith. Have you ever been privy to liturgical wranglings? If so, you’d understand why many joke: “What’s the difference between a terrorist and a liturgist? Sometimes it’s possible to negotiate with terrorists.” Lewis considered the Mass a “duty,” and our “marching orders” include participating in it. This “order” was far greater than any personal inclination to customize the words, language or music.

Lewis’ approach was the opposite of the approaches of psychologists such as Freud or William James. While Lewis applauded the efficacy of therapy for troubled people for whom even prayer did not bring peace and healing, he wanted to stir people into Christian activity rather than having them engage in endless discussions about what they “experienced or felt.”

Fourth, Lewis considered the lilies of the field — they did not worry about tomorrow, Solomon in all his glory was not greater. The troubles in each day are sufficient for one’s attention. Lewis gave examples drawn from life in the 1940’s. Today, while prudent planning may be key in addressing global warming, saving for college or retirement, and keeping cholesterol at good levels, there’s always a risk that focusing on these larger concerns can take the focus away from putting the Gospel into practice today.

Fifth, indulge in appropriate pleasures often. People who cannot see the beauty of God’s great gifts all around them can end up bitter. Many of life’s

pleasures are free — friendships, music, gardens, sunsets, nature walks, exercise, watching children play, exercise, living within one's means. The list may even be infinite. Making time for such pleasures daily keeps the devil away better than moderate exercise can keep us from cardiologists.

Sixth, gratitude. When one is happy and grateful, the devil's temptations become irrelevant. The Psalms are filled with songs of gratitude. It's a virtue found throughout Scripture and a key feature in the conclusion of Ignatian spiritual exercises. Gratitude is also a basis for many 12-step programs, some of which benefited from the presence of a Jesuit spiritual advisor when they were developed.

Satan is rarely fought with fanfare and massive armies. He is fought primarily in our own hearts and wills. Among the many he offered for our consideration, this may be one of C.S. Lewis' most enduring observations.

Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? Satan surely knows. As we often acknowledge in the Prayer to St. Michael the Archangel, Satan prowls around the world seeking the ruin of souls. His presence is not confined to Harvard's ivied walls. So be alert to how you can resist his clutches in your daily life.

William Van Ornum *is professor of psychology at Marist College and director of research and development/grants at American Mental Health Foundation in New York City. He studied theology and scripture at DePaul University.*