

Archpriest Georges Florovsky (1893-1979)

The Darkness of Night*

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Quotations from the Greek have here been transliterated.
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"Evil is Among Us"

The existence of evil is a paradox and a mystery.

The Existence of Evil as a Paradox

In a world that is created by God, whose laws and purposes are established by Divine wisdom and goodness, how is it possible that evil exists? For evil is precisely that which opposes itself to God and resists Him, perverting his designs and repudiating his ordinances. Evil is, furthermore, that which is not created by God. And since the Divine will establishes the reasons for everything which exists (and this Sovereign will alone establishes "sufficient reasons"), one can assert that evil, as evil, exists despite a lack of reasons, exists without a single reason for its existence. As St. Gregory of Nyssa stated, it is "an unsown herb, without seed and without root." One could say: *phaenomenon omnino non fundatum*. It is God alone Who establishes the foundations of the world.

Certainly there are always and everywhere causes and reasons for evil. But the *causality* of evil is deeply peculiar.

82

The causes and reasons of evil are always an absurdity, more or less veiled. This strange causality is not included in the ideal "chain" of God's universal causality; it splits and disfigures it. It is a causality rivaling that of the Creator, coming, as it were, from a destroyer of the world. And this destructive power— whence does it come? For all real power belongs to God alone. One wonders whether the existence of evil is compatible with the existence of God. Nevertheless, this illegitimate power is not at all an anemic

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phantom. It is a real force, a violent energy. The opposition of evil to God is very active. The Good is seriously restricted and oppressed by the revolt of evil. God himself is engaged in a struggle with these powers of darkness. And in this struggle there are very real losses, a perpetual diminution of the Good. Evil is an ontological danger. Universal harmony, willed and established by God, is truly decomposed. The world is fallen. The entire world is surrounded by a dismal twilight of nothingness. No longer is it that world conceived and created by God. There are morbid innovations, new existences— existences which are false, but real. Evil adds something to what is created by God, it has a "miraculous" force of *imitating* creation— indeed, evil is productive in its destructions. In the fallen world there is an incomprehensible surplus, a surplus which has entered existence against the will of God. In a certain sense, the world is stolen from its Master and Creator.

It is more than an intellectual paradox; it is rather a scandal, a terrible temptation for faith, because, above all, this destruction of existence by evil is in a large measure irreparable. The lofty "universalist" hope is prohibited us by the direct witness of Holy Scripture and by the explicit teaching of the Church. There will be exterior darkness for "the sons of perdition" in the world to come! In the case of perseverance in evil, all the devastations and perversions produced by it will preserve themselves forever in the paradoxical eternity of hell. Hell is a sinister testimony to the staggering power of evil. In the final reckoning

83

of this historical struggle between Divine Goodness and evil, all the ravages produced among unrepentant beings will only be acknowledged by the simple, final decree of condemnation. The perverse split, introduced into the world of God by an act of usurped power, seems to be eternal. The unity of the world is compromised forever. Evil seems to have eternal conquests. The obstinacy of evil, its resolved impenitence, is never covered by the omnipotence of God's compassion. We are now already in the realm of the full mystery.

The Existence of Evil as a Mystery

God has his response to the world of evil. "The ancient law of human freedom," as St. Irenaeus states, is still respected by God, who has granted from the beginning this dignity to spiritual beings. Any coercion or compulsion by Divine Grace is excluded from possibility. God has in fact responded authoritatively to evil, once for all, through his Beloved Son, who came here upon the earth to bear the sins of the world and the sins of all humanity. God's absolute response to evil was the Cross of Jesus, the sufferings of the Servant of God, the Death of the Incarnate Son. A Russian preacher of the 19th century stated once, "Evil begins on earth, but it disquiets heaven, and causes the Son of God to descend to earth." Evil causes God himself to suffer, and he accepts this

suffering to the end. And the glory of eternal life shines forth victoriously from the tomb of God Incarnate. The Passion of Jesus was a triumph, a decisive victory. But it is a triumph of Divine Love which calls and accepts without any coercion. From this time on, the existence of evil is given to us only within this framework of the Co-Suffering Love of God. And the Love, and even the sublime majesty of God, are also revealed to us in the enigmatic frame-

84

work of evil and sin ... *Felix culpa quae tantum et talem meruit habere Redemptorem.*

One defines evil as nothingness. Certainly evil never exists by itself but only inside of Goodness. Evil is a pure negation, a privation or a mutilation. Undoubtedly evil is a lack, a defect, *defectus*. But the structure of evil is rather antinomic. Evil is a void of nothingness; but it is a void which exists, swallowing and devouring beings. Evil is a powerlessness; it never creates--but its destructive energy is enormous. Evil never ascends; it always descends--but the very debasement of being which it produces is frightening. Nevertheless, there is an illusory grandeur even in this baseness of evil. Occasionally there is something of genius in sin and in evil. Evil is chaotic; it is a separation, a decomposition constantly in progress, a disorganization of the entire structure of being. But evil is also, without doubt, vigorously organized. Everything in this sad domain of deception and illusion is amphibolic and ambiguous. Undoubtedly, evil only lives through the Good which it deforms, but it also adapts it to its needs. But this deformed "Universe" is a reality which asserts itself.

Actually, the problem of evil is not at all a purely philosophical problem, and that is why it can never be resolved on the neutral plane of a theory of being. It is no longer a purely ethical problem, and on the plane of natural morality one can never surmount the correlativity of good and evil. The problem of evil only takes on its proper character on the religious plane. The meaning of evil is a radical opposition to God, a revolt, a disobedience, a resistance. The unique source of evil, in the strict sense of the term, is sin, the opposition to God and the tragic separation from Him. Speculation about the freedom of choice is always barren and ambiguous. Freedom of choice, the *libertas minor* of St. Augustine and the "*gnomic will*" [*"thelêma gnômikon"*] of St. Maximos the Confessor, is a disfigured freedom, a freedom diminished and impover-

85

ished, a freedom as it exists after the fall, among fallen beings. The duality of purpose, the two correlative directions, do not belong to the essence of the primordial freedom of innocent beings. It must be restored to penitent sinners through asceticism and Grace. Original sin was not just an erroneous choice, not just an option for the wrong direction, but rather a refusal to ascend toward God, a desertion from the service of God.

Actually, choice as such was not at all possible for the first sinner because evil did not yet exist as an ideal possibility. If, however, it was a choice, it was not a choice *between* good and evil but only a choice between God and himself, between service and sloth. And it is precisely in this sense that St. Athanasius interpreted the fall and original sin in his work, *Contra Gentes*. The vocation of primordial man, innate in his very nature, was to love God with filial devotion and to serve him in the world of which man was designated to be prophet, priest, and king. It was an appeal from the paternal love of God to the filial love of man. Undoubtedly, to follow God involved a total surrender to Divine arms. This was not yet a sacrifice. Innocent man had nothing to sacrifice, for everything he possessed came from the Grace of God. (Here, there is something more profound than a voluptuous attachment to the world.) It was rather a tragedy of a misguided love. According to St. Athanasius, the human fall consists precisely in the fact that man limits himself to himself, that man becomes, as it were, in love with himself. Through this concentration on himself, man separated himself from God, and broke the spiritual and free contact he had with God. It was a kind of delirium, a self-erotic obsession, a spiritual narcissism. And through this, man isolated himself from God and soon became aware of his involvement in the external cosmic flow. One can say it was a de-spiritualization of human existence. All the rest— the death and decomposition of the human structure— came as a result. In any case, the fall was first realized in

86

the realm of the spirit, just as it already had been in the angelic world. The meaning of original sin is the same everywhere— self-eroticism, pride, and vanity. All the rest is only a projection of this spiritual catastrophe into the different areas of the human structure. Evil comes from above, not from below; from the created spirit and not from matter. It is more profound than a false choice of direction, more profound even than a choice between an inferior and a superior good. Rather, it was the infidelity of love, the insane separation from the Only One Who is worthy of affection and love. This infidelity is the main source of the negative character of evil. It was a primordial negation and it was fatal.

It is necessary to take precaution and not identify the infirmity of fallen nature with the inherent imperfection of all created nature. There is nothing morbid or sinister in the "natural imperfection" of created nature except what is penetrated "from above" after the consummated fall. In pre-fallen nature, one can perhaps speak of lack and flaws. But in the fallen world there is something more— perversion, revolt, vertiginous blasphemy, violence. It is the domain of usurpation. The dark tide of this perverted love envelops all creatures and the entire cosmos. Behind all the negations of evil one always discerns something quasipositive, an initial licentiousness, the egoistic arbitrariness of finite personalities. The fallen world is de-centralized, or rather, it is oriented around an imaginary or fictitious center. One could say perhaps that the circle (with a unique

center) is deformed, becoming an ellipse with two points of reference— God and anti-God. Being, in any case, is dynamically divided in two. There are now two tendencies intersecting and crossing each other, both remaining essentially different. One could say there are two worlds within one: there are the Two Cities of St. Augustine. Evil, beginning with a practical atheism, puts itself in the place of God, resulting in a theoretical atheism and consequently, in a resolved deification of itself. In this *dualized* world true freedom

87

does not exist. Freedom of choice is only a remote and pale reflection of real freedom.

Evil is created by personal agents. Evil, in the strict sense of this word, exists only in persons or in their creations and their acts. Physical and cosmic evil also originates from these personal acts. And that is why evil can have power, why it can be active. For evil is a perverse personal activity. But this activity inevitably spreads itself to the impersonal. Evil de-personalizes personality itself. Complete de-personalization, however, can never be achieved; there is a potential limit which can never be attained. But the tendency and the aspiration of evil toward this limit of total disintegration is energetically accentuated everywhere. Even demons never cease being persons. It is the intrinsic form of their existence which cannot be lost. But, since personality is the "image of God" in spiritual beings, personal character can only be preserved in a constant conversation with God. Separated from God, personality vanishes; it is stricken with spiritual sterility. The isolated personality, which encloses itself within itself, often loses itself. In the state of sin there is always tension between the two internal solicitations: the "I," and something impersonal, represented by the instincts, or rather by passions.

Passions are the place, the seat of evil in the human person. "Passions," *ta pathê* of the Fathers and of the Greek masters of spirituality, are active, they entrap. The person possessed by passions is passive; he suffers constraint. Passions are always impersonal; they are a concentration of cosmic energies which make the human person its prisoner, its slave. They are blind and they blind those whom they possess. The impassioned man, "the man of passions," does not act on his own, but rather, is acted upon: *fata trahunt*. He often loses even the consciousness of being a free agent. He doubts the existence and the possibility of freedom in general. He adopts rather the "*necessarionist*" concept of reality [the expression of Charles Renouvier].

88

And, as a consequence, he loses his personality, his personal identity. He becomes chaotic, with multiple faces, or rather— masks. The "man of passions" is not at all free, although he can give an impression of activity and energy. He is nothing more than a "ball" of impersonal influences. He is hypnotized by these influences which have a real power over him. Arbitrariness is not freedom. Or, perhaps, it is an imaginary freedom,

which actually engenders servitude. In the spiritual life we begin precisely with a struggle against passions. "Impassability" is the main goal of spiritual ascent.

"Impassability," the *apatheia* of the Greeks, is in general poorly understood and interpreted. It is not an indifference, nor a cold insensibility of the heart. On the contrary, it is an active state, a state of spiritual activity, which is acquired only after struggles and ordeals. It is rather an independence from passions. Each person's own "I" is finally regained, freed from a fatal bondage. But one can regain oneself only in God. True "impassability" is achieved only in an encounter with the Living God. The path which leads there is the path of obedience, even of servitude to God, but this servitude engenders true freedom, a concrete freedom, the real freedom of the adopted sons of God. In evil, the human personality is absorbed by the impersonal milieu, even though the sinner may pretend to be free. In God, the personality is restored and reintegrated in the Holy Spirit, although a severe discipline is imposed on the individual.

Evil is revealed to us in the world at first under the aspect of suffering and sorrow. The world is empty, cold, and indifferent (cf. "the indifferent nature" in Pushkin). It is a non-responding wasteland. We all suffer because of evil. Evil, sown everywhere in the world, causes us to suffer. And the contemplation of this universal suffering brings us sometimes to the brink of despair. Universal suffering was not discovered for the first time by Schopenhauer. It had already been attested to by St. Paul (Rom. 8:20-22), and he has

89

given us a very clear explication: evil is introduced in the creature by sin. All creation suffers. There is a cosmic suffering. The entire world is poisoned by evil and malevolent energies, and the entire world suffers because of it.

The intricate problem of Theodicy was first inspired by these facts of suffering. It was one of the primary questions of Dostoevsky. The world is hard, cruel, and pitiless. And the world is terrible and frightening: *terror antiquus*. There is chaos in the world; there are subterranean storms, an elemental disorder. Man feels himself frail and lost in this inhospitable world. But evil encounters us not only externally, in an exterior milieu, but also internally, in our own existence. We also are sick— we ourselves— and we suffer because of it. Again there is an unexpected discovery— not only do we suffer from evil, but we do evil. And sometimes one is delighted with evil and unhappiness. One is sometimes enraptured by the *Fleurs du mal*. One sometimes dreams of an "ideal of Sodom." The abyss— it has a sinister appeal. Sometimes one loves ambiguous choices. One can be enchanted by them. It is easier to do evil than to do good. Everyone can discover in himself this "subterranean" darkness, the subconscious full of malignant seeds, full of cruelty and deceit. Alas— the analyses of Dostoevsky (and of many others) are not morbid dreams of a pessimist who looks at life through a black glass. It is a

truthful revelation of the sad reality of our existential situation. One could find the same revelations in the ancient teachers of Christian spirituality. There is a delirium, a spiritual fever, a *libido* at the core of "this world," at the core of our existence. One cannot ask an insane or maniacal person for reasons. He does not have reasons for his folly. He has lost his reason; he is insane.

Origen was very close to the correct solution when he attributed the origin of evil, in the world of spirits, either to boredom and idleness [*desidia et laboris taedium in servando bono*], or to a satiety of Divine contemplation and love [*De princ.* II, 9-2; and 8-3]. In any case, with regard to

90

us now, we find in our heart and intelligence many revivals of the same paroxysms of delirium, the same absurdities. *Libido* is not the same thing as carnal concupiscence. It is a broader term. It is synonymous with self-eroticism, originating from sin. Evil in man is an ignorance and an insensibility; it is the blindness of reason and the hardness of the heart. Man seals himself up, encloses himself in himself, isolates and separates himself. But evil is multi-form and chaotic. There are contrasting forms in evil: the aggressive form— *der Wille zur Macht*, sadism; and the solipsistic form— indifference, "the cold heart." Evil is divided within itself: it is a discord and a disharmony, *inordinatio*. Evil is ambiguous, wavering, variable. It does not have its own stable character. The seat of evil in man is in the depths of his heart, and not only on the empirical plane. Nature itself is affected; nature itself is no longer pure. And it is rather dynamic, a dynamic or functional perversion which is not yet consolidated in a metaphysical transformation. The existence of evil is a parasitical existence; evil lives because of the Good, *ex ratione boni*. The elements are the same in the original world and in the fallen world. But the principle of organization is changed. And although dynamic, the perversion is inconvertible. He who has descended voluntarily into the abyss of evil cannot reascend from there by himself. His energies are exhausted. Without doubt, even in the demoniac depths, the creature remains the work of God and the traits of Divine design are never effaced. The image of God, obscured by the infidelity of sin, is nevertheless preserved intact, and that is why there is always, even in the abyss, an ontological receptacle for Divine appeal, for the Grace of God. This is true even for those who obstinately shut themselves off from the appeal of the Cross, who have always rendered themselves incapable of receiving the vivifying gifts of this Divine Love, the gifts of the Paraclete. Metaphysical identity is not destroyed even among the demons. Demons are still, according to a phrase by St.

91

Gregory of Nyssa, angels by nature, and angelic dignity is not completely abolished in them.

But perhaps we could say that this image of God in man is paralyzed in a certain sense, and rendered ineffective after the separation from the One who should always be reflected in this image, in this living and personal mirror. It is not enough to begin again the ascent to God— it is necessary to have the living co-operation of God himself, who restores the circulation of spiritual life in a dead man, enslaved in and paralyzed by sin and evil. The paradox of evil resides precisely in this split of human existence and in the entire cosmic structure; it resides in the dynamic splitting of life in two, a split which resulted from the separation from God. It is as though there were two souls within each person. Good and evil are strangely mixed. But no synthesis is possible. "Natural" Good is too weak to resist evil. And evil exists only through the Good. Human unity is seriously compromised, if not lost. The Grace of God alone can surmount this human impasse.

Formal analysis of evil is not enough. The existence of evil is a reality on the religious plane. And only through spiritual effort can one understand and resolve this paradox, surmount this scandal, and penetrate the mystery of Good and Evil.