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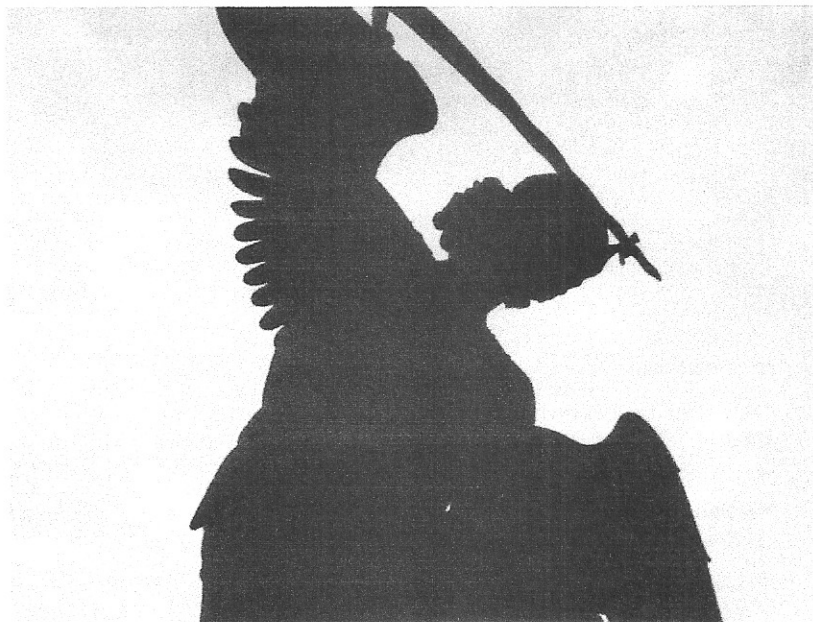
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St. Michael defeating the devil. (Shutterstock)

COMMENTARY | APR 23, 2016

The Devil Is in the Details: Pope Francis, the Devil and Hell

COMMENTARY

Matthew E. Bunson

When it comes to affirming the existence of the devil, Pope Francis has been unequivocal, consistent and emphatic throughout his papacy. But when it comes to the existence of hell, his teaching has been less unambiguous.

On the morning of April 11, 2014, Pope Francis [used his daily homily](#) at the Mass in the chapel of the St. Martha residence in Vatican City to focus on a theme that has long been among his concerns: Satan.

"Jesus' life was a battle," Francis said. "He came to conquer evil, to conquer the prince of this world, to conquer the devil." He added, "Our spiritual life, our Christian life, is a battle ... The devil does not want us to become holy; he does not want us to follow Jesus."

The Pope continued, "Of course, one of you will say: 'But Father, you are so old-fashioned, speaking about the devil in the 21st century!' ... Watch out, the devil exists! The devil exists even in the 21st century. And we must not be naive. We must learn from the Gospel how to battle against him."



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The homily of Pope Francis was consistent with his teachings on the reality of the devil from the very start of his pontificate to only a few weeks ago, when he issued his latest apostolic exhortation on holiness, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (The Call to Holiness in Today's World), in which he devoted an entire chapter to spiritual combat, discernment and Satan.

On March 14, 2013, the day after his election, he told the cardinals who had elected him, "When one does not profess Jesus Christ — I recall the phrase of Leon Bloy, 'Whoever does not pray to God, prays to the devil' — one professes the worldliness of the devil."

And this was not some postelection embrace of the Catechism. In his time as the archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, he made many similar declarations.

In his famous conversation with his friend Rabbi Abraham Skorka, published as *On Heaven and Earth* (Image, 2013), then-Cardinal Bergoglio said, "In my personal experience, I feel him every time that I am tempted to do something that is not what God wants for me. I believe that the devil exists."



The Catechism, of course, teaches bluntly about the reality of the devil:

"Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy. Scripture and the Church's Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called 'Satan' or the 'devil'" (391).

The Catechism goes on to emphasize, "The power of Satan is, nonetheless, not infinite. He is only a creature, powerful from the fact that he is pure spirit, but still a creature."

The devil as a creature is reiterated by Francis in his new exhortation, with the vital point, "We should not think of the devil as a myth, a representation, a symbol, a figure of speech or an idea."

This point is important because here Francis is articulating a position — the one the Church has always taught — that now is held only by a minority of Catholics.

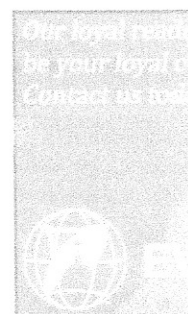
A [recent analysis by CARA](#) (the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University) found that while belief in the devil has held steady over the last decades (with 70% of U.S. adults believing in the devil), belief in Satan as a creature has declined in favor of the devil as a mere symbol. Overall, 69% consider Satan to be a symbol, while 31% believe Satan is a "living being."

As for Catholics, only 17% see Satan as a "living being," the lowest among Christian groups and only one percentage higher than the "Nones." CARA's assessment is sobering:

"What does that mean? Well, symbols aren't really going to stir the same concerns in someone that a being might. ... Catholics who believe in the devil and hell are more likely than those who do not to be religiously active. But there are other impacts we can see in the survey. For example, Catholics who believe Satan is a being are more likely than those who believe Satan is a symbol to say they believe the world is 'clearly divided into good and evil' (42% compared to 22%). Those who see Satan as a symbol are more likely to believe that the world is 'more complex' than being clearly divided into good and evil forces."

Which raises the related question: How do people today perceive hell, and what does Francis have to say about that?

During Holy Week, the 93-year-old atheist founder of *La Repubblica*, Eugenio Scalfari, [caused uproar with the claim](#) that Francis had told him, "Hell does not exist; the disappearance of the souls of sinners exists."



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Scalfari, who has said he doesn't take notes and recreates his interviews from memory, has previously made similar assertions about the Pope, and the Vatican then and now has responded with various disclaimers that the "quotation" should not "be considered as a faithful transcription of the Holy Father's words."

However, a far more fulsome denial of Scalfari is in order from the Holy See and from Francis himself.

Since his election, Francis has spoken on hell as he obviously has the devil, but Scalfari, who has been granted a papal interview several times, has claimed more than once that the Pope has denied the existence of hell.

Given the seriousness of Scalfari's repeated claim, which implies the Pope might subscribe to the old but persistent heresy of Annihilationism, this assertion demands a clear refutation — most effectively from Francis himself, since he has yet to repudiate Scalfari's remarks personally and publicly.

Found among some Protestant theologians, as well as a few modern Catholic ones, Annihilationism argues that, rather than face eternal damnation, the souls of unrepentant sinners simply cease to exist. There is more that can be said about the lingering heresy, but the Catechism declares:

"The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death, the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, 'eternal fire.' The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs" (1035).

Is Francis somehow an Annihilationist? Compare the Catechism to [Francis' Message for Lent in 2016](#) that noted that "the danger always remains that, by a constant refusal to open the doors of their hearts to Christ, who knocks on them in the poor, the proud, rich and powerful will end up condemning themselves and plunging into the eternal abyss of solitude, which is hell."

This is rather obscure, and the timing of the Pope's new controversy over hell is particularly problematic because, while belief in the devil as a creature rather than a myth or symbol has waned among Catholics, so, too, has belief in hell.

According to the [2014 "Religious Landscape Study"](#) by the Pew Research Center, 58% of U.S. adults believe in hell, essentially unchanged from 2007.

Among Catholics, however, only 69% believe in hell, and 29% do not. By comparison, 82% of evangelicals believe in hell, and 11% do not, while 60% of mainline Protestants believe, and 29% do not.

And just as the denial of Satan's reality is toxic for other aspects of faith and morals, so, too, does a waning belief in hell form part of a withering of wider belief and practice and a severely malnourished eschatology.

Consider the [latest findings by Gallup](#) that Mass attendance is down to 39%, a 6% decline from 2014 to 2017.

Pew found that the less one attends church and prays, the less one believes in hell.

In an era of declining belief in the Real Presence, collapsing Mass attendance and the denial by many theologians of objective moral truth, the idea of the devil as a hazy symbol of evil is hardly surprising.

Gaudete et Exsultate provides a helpful doctrinal corrective on the devil to an increasingly disbelieving Catholic faithful.

However, a friend with whom Francis has spoken repeatedly and candidly is claiming the pontiff is suggesting heresy regarding hell.

It is vital for the Church — starting with Pope Francis — to teach with coherence and vigor on the Four Last Things: death, judgment, heaven and hell.

Consequently, it is also vital to have a manifest and specific denial of Scalfari and a public declaration of what the Holy Father believes about the destiny of our souls.

The devil may be in the details, but even more so in their absence.