Chapter 23

Superstition and the aspects of this false devotion

Superstition is a vice which denies God his true honour, or gives Him false honour; or when it gives Him true honour, does not do so the correct way. To take an example. When the honour due only to God is given to his creatures, such as the devil, the Sun, the Moon, and so on, then this robs Him of His honour and denies Him it. A further example. False honour is given to God when the sacrifices of the Old Law are offered to Him, because they no longer have meaning since the death of Christ Jesus. The same applies when attempts are made by infidels or by any (heretical) sect whatsoever to offer Him ceremonial devotions; or even to offer any exaggerated form of devotion or honour contrary /f.106v/ to the customs of the Church. Superstition of the first kind has pestilential aspects and derivatives, which can be reduced to five in number: the first, idolatry; the second, magic; the third, forecasting the future or divination; the fourth, vain observance; the fifth, maleficium or evil cursing. Let us discuss each in detail.

Idolatry is giving to a false god the honour due to the true God. So idolatry is worship of an idol. Magic is an inordinate power to perform supernatural things. Supernatural actions can be performed two ways, with God’s help or with the devil’s. The latter way constitutes magic. To make it clearer, it must be noted that no man, however much of a magician he is, can bring about by himself the results of this art. All the results are the devil’s work, at the request of the magician. Magic has no power over demons, however much magicians may pretend it has in order to deceive the ignorant. It is true that among the malign spirits are those who are controlled by other spirits and required to obey humans. The magician makes two kinds of pact or agreement with the devil. In the first, a solemn one, the enemy of the human race appears, seated on a throne, (before the magician himself or anyone else who because of this spirit has lost anything. But normally, as we learn in the Histories, intermediaries are used here. The agreement involves a negation of the divine precepts and sacraments and of all respect for God. When the man has done his part, the devil makes his offer, promising favours, riches, etc. The other special agreement is by tacit invocation, as they call it, when the magician attempts to do something by modes and means which cannot bring about the intended effects, either by their own (natural power) or by any supernatural power. For instance, by pronouncing strings of meaningless words. Or when they trace shapes and letters, making not a cross but ovals, squares or triangles. Again, when they make mixed-up statements, such as that Christ had fevers. Or again, in imposing conditions which have no connection with
the aim, as when they carry about with them words from the Scriptures written on a scrap of paper, or herbs collected on a particular day or at a particular hour, etc. But normally a new agreement is always invoked and rarely does the magician depend on the repetition of a particular invocation without such a new agreement.

By his nature the devil has much power and knowledge, but he acts in only three ways. First, /f.107/ by moving an object from one place to another, for instance, by transporting a snake from its normal place to a place where it has never been seen, indicating that the devil has great power over the lower elements (of the natural world). This transportation happens so quickly that great distances are covered in the blinking of an eye. The second way is to achieve novel effects, not by personal intervention, but by secret application of natural causes, while hastening their action. As the devil knows the nature of stones, herbs, animals and all things in the world, their properties and where they are to be found, he can make a tree grow up in a brief space of time, by stimulating the seed and other necessary factors; and he can do the same with fruits and animals. Very often he cures the sick, by applying secret medicines and entering their bodies to drive out ill humours. Furthermore, he can deceive the senses, by presenting actual objects not in their normal appearance but in strange forms, and thus he makes us see lions and other animals which he shapes in the air, after first convincing us of their reality. Working in another way, he disturbs the senses so that they do not detect external influences, and man's imagination is excited so that it seems something is present which is not, as happens in dreams. If persisted in, it is heresy to believe that the devil can do all these things without divine permission, since he can only work with the permission of the Creator (Book III, Kings, chapter 18 [I Kings, 18 : Elijah and the prophets of Baal]). This may be deduced from what happened to Micaiah before King Ahab: "I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of [all his prophets] [I Kings, 22:22].

Now let us discuss divination, the announcement out of time of events which in the order of nature cannot yet be known about. To learn about events by invoking the devil, is that divination? Neither man nor the devil can know the predestined fate of the good or the punishment of the evil, for what depends on man's free will, these being future contingencies which do not yet exist. The same applies to those things which are hidden in such a way that man cannot know how to discover them at the order of the evil spirit; and if he tries it is the measure of his malice. The devil can surmise certain things which have not yet been done by men, through his experience of man and man's tendencies, so that he is aided by the sublety of his nature. Also it is by the revelation of the Good Angel, when God permits
him to reveal things to the devil. He is able to say what illness you are going to have and if you will die from it or what building is going to fall, because he knows /f.107v/ from the inside the causes of misfortune and its secrets. He knows the timbers and stones of palaces and the faults they have and he reveals what must be done about them, and he can warn us about plagues, eclipses and storms, through his knowledge of science and astrology. In each way that the devil is invoked, there exists a special form of divination. Prestigio is to invoke the devil through images. When we hope to learn about secrets in dreams, this is called divination by dreams. Necromancia is when the evil spirit enters into a dead body and speaks through it. If he enters into the body of a living thing, that is Pitonisa (pythonissio). Divination by the stars and celestial bodies is Geomancia; by indications which appear in water, Hydromancia; by indications in the air, Aeromancia, in the fire, Pyromancia, and in the entrails of animals, Auspicio. Anyone who consults these evildoers, these diviners, is excommunicate. Astrologia is divination by the movements and locations of stars; Augurium is by the howling and calls of animals; Augurium is Auspiciun by the calls of birds. Omen is divination by what another man says by chance or for some fortuitous reason; Guromancia is by body marks and shapes.

As for Astrologia, it cannot be denied that by it one can learn about natural effects, such as eclipses, rains, etc; and also the humours and inclinations of men, since the stars influence our human bodies. In three aspects its use is forbidden. First and above all, to gain knowledge of the mysteries of Grace and matters which depend on the divine will. Secondly, to gain knowledge of matters which depend on the free will of the individual, by assuming that certain things are bound to happen. This is untrue, since neither the heavens nor any other created element can constrain the free will of man, and what comes about can be altered by many factors. However it is not evil in itself for anyone to wish to gain information about a contingent matter or one free to change, provided that it is recognised that there can be no certainty. But if the assertion of an astrologer, based on the system he follows, is taken as a certain forecast, that is evil and corrupt. In these instances, one is tacitly invoking the devil, by employing a means of gaining knowledge which is (without his aid) incapable of providing it.

Augurio and auspicio are sometimes licit if they relate to matters that animals and birds predict naturally, as when bats flying far from houses announce fine weather, or when diving-birds leave the sea to signal a storm. However if the matters are outside their power or beyond their instincts, then it is illicit. /f.108/
Now it is time to discuss the drawing of lots or matis, as performed by the heathen of Serra Leoa. There are many different kinds. The first, divinatoria, employs stones or pieces of wood in order to gain knowledge concerning hidden matters or the future. This is always an evil practice. The second kind, divisoria, consists of drawing lots in order to learn what will happen to someone: this is licit, when it is not intended to seek information from the devil but merely to select from random possibilities about the future. The third kind, consultoria, is in order to know what to do in a future circumstance. If done in expectation of action from the devil it is very wrong, for one should not expect nothing from him. But if it is in expectation of being God's will then it is licit. For instance, two persons are equally in extreme need, and I can only help one: in this case I may consult God as to which one it should be. This is the case stated by St. Augustine, "When human means easily applied are not available, it is for God to decide", Div, Tom.2, Q.95, art.8. See Tolet in the Summa ad primum praeceptum Decalogi, where he gives examples. But it is necessary that this should be done reverently and not for profane reasons.

With regard to vain observance, this occurs in the tacit invocation of the devil, when men seek by this to employ devices which lack the inherent virtue to bring about the desired effect. An infamous example in this category is the notorious practice of multiplying prayers and fasting; when done in order to acquire scientific knowledge, this is as if knowledge could flow into one. Similarly the curing of headache and various other disorders of men and animals by pronouncing certain prayers. Stopping bleeding by the use of vain means, such as saying nonsense words or ridiculous words, normally involves invocation of the devil. In this case ignorance prevents it being a mortal sin; but after being warned, it is just this. However if such prayers are free from all evil intent and are said out of devotion, this is not evil. But it is best to follow the practice of the Church and say the Pater Noster and Ave Maria. Accidents come in here: if one steps out of the house on the left foot and stumbles, if the cock crows as one leaves by night, if one dreams about an unhappy event. Ignorance alone excuses wickedness in these and other similar beliefs: if one goes to sea on a Thursday, etc; if one carries false relics, or even true ones in certain circumstances, as if the Gospel was written on blank paper. Similarly when false results are promised: he who dies in sin while fighting in the war, and so on. People of this kind rely much on their
relics /f.108v/ for such results, etc, as for instance when they are persuaded by Mandinga bezerins in Ethiopia about the value of false amulets, which either have no trace of good in them, or else possess so little holy virtue as a protection against evil, that they are more likely to attract evil and to be the chief cause of the successive ills which befall those who rely on them, as sufficient experience demonstrates. Now that this has been said about vain observance, let us now discuss maleficium.