



Fr. Bill Peckman 11/26/17
SS. Peter & Paul, Boonville
St. Joseph, Fayette

Prepare Ye The way of the Lord: Learning Spiritual Warfare

We are coming up on the 1st Sunday of Advent. This weekend we celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King. This weekend should remind us that we belong, as those baptized in to the Body Of Christ, the Church, to an entity much larger than one person, one parish, one diocese, or even as the Church Militant. We belong to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Within that Body, we serve God and each other. Within this kingdom, we seek to expand the Kingdom and to protect the Kingdom from what would seek to despoil it. Every Kingdom has an army. We, the Church Militant, are that army here on earth. While in this life, we engage in warfare. Our enemy is not our fellow human beings, but the devil. As St. Peter reminds us in his 1st Epistle, "Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8)

Not the Stuff of Myths and Fairy Tales

It has been said many times that the greatest trick of the devil is to convince people he doesn't exist. It is hard to fight an enemy that you do not think exists. Certainly, in our culture, the devil and the demonic has become a sideshow for horror movies, TV shows fascinated with the paranormal, and otherwise dismissed as the stuff of myths and legends. The devil is reduced to a red-faced, horned, pitchfork-carrying, and smiling trickster. Some pooh-pooh the idea of the devil and demonic as mere early man's misunderstanding of mental illness. Some find the necessity to do away with the concept of the devil as they also wish to do away with the concept of God. Indeed, modern morality, given its desire for no objective truth, pans the idea of a devil because to have such an idea would take morality out of the mere subjective (opinion) and bring it into the objective.

It doesn't take much effort to know our society is in the midst of major battle over morals. The lines are drawn over most anything to do with human sexuality. The lines are drawn on many life issues (abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, suicide, and other end of life issues). The lines are drawn in every field of life from faith to economics to politics to education. The battles take place on our airwaves and on the internet. The battles rage in the halls of power, both religious and secular, and in boardrooms across the country. The battles wage in our homes, our families, our churches, and within our own individual hearts. The battle is often a scorched-earth winner-takes-all endgame.

To effectively fight these battles, personal and corporate, we have to know who we are up against and how to do battle. If we consign our foe to a theological ash-heap, we leave open our flank. Our foe will have no problem mercilessly overrunning us. I can assure you, with devastating realness, that the devil and demonic do very much exist and are not to be toyed with or dismissed. I have come into contact with these things over the course of 20 years of priesthood and there are things I have seen I wish I could un-see.

Our Forefathers Understood

In the Gospels, we see Jesus often doing battle with the Devil and his minions. Some of the more effete of scholars try to dismiss these encounters as myths and other forms of analogy. They do so for the very same reason anyone dismisses the Scriptures: it is hard to make your own God and religion when one already exists. Jesus, however, did not do battle with a myth. He wasn't tempted by a mythical theological construct in the desert. He didn't cast demonic analogies from the possessed. He didn't defeat a fanciful figment of the imagination on the Cross. He did battle with an entity who desperately wanted Him to fail.

His apostles knew what they were up against. For them, as we see in the Epistles of the New Testament, the devil was a very real and deadly enemy. They understood the root of the battle. St. Paul talks about the concept of spiritual warfare extensively. St. Paul understood the brutish nature of the devil and his desire to take down those who were of God. In Ephesians 6:10-20, St. Paul talks about the armaments and armor to be used by a follower of Christ in defeating the devil. Again, St. Paul is not prescribing battle against a myth or an allegorical figment of imagination. St. Paul knew the battle was real.

Throughout the centuries of Catholicism, we have long understood that the devil and his influence are not myths to be dismissed. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, when reflecting on the petitions of the Our Father, remarks in section 2851, “..Evil is not an abstraction, but refers to a person, Satan, the Evil One, the angel who opposes God. The devil is the one who ‘throws himself across’ God’s plan and His work of salvation accomplished in Christ.” To the Church the devil is not a myth, but is very much real. It is why the last two popes have been insistent in the training of exorcists to be stationed in every diocese in the world. This should signal the Church understands it does not battle a mythological construct, but battles a very dangerous foe.

The Church does recognize that through Christ we have the upper hand in this battle. As is written in the Catechism, section 395, *“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. He cannot prevent the building up of God's reign. Although Satan may act in the world out of hatred for God and his kingdom in Christ Jesus, and although his action may cause grave injuries - of a spiritual nature and, indirectly, even of a physical nature - to each man and to society, the action is permitted by divine providence which with strength and gentleness guides human and cosmic history. It is a great mystery that providence should permit diabolical activity, but we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him.”*

We can defeat the devil through God's grace. We can regain ground lost to him. Through the grace of the Sacraments, in particular Confession, we can beat back the foe.

To do this, though, requires some understanding of how we are attacked and how we fend off these attacks or regain ground lost to previous attacks. What are his weapons? I posit the three most potent weapons are fear, wrath, and selfishness. Knowing the weapon being used against you gives you the ability to use properly the weapons and armor given us through the sacramental life of the Church.