

**Homily for the Western Illinois Catholic Men's Prayer Breakfast  
January 11, 2014**

**Knights of Columbus  
Quincy, Illinois**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and deacons, my dear brothers in Christ: prior to the Second Vatican Council, it was common to hear the Church as it exists here on earth to be described as the Church Militant. Such a description comes from a truth that we hear in our first reading for today's Mass from St. John where he writes: "We know that we belong to God, and the whole world is under the power of the Evil One" (1 John 5:19). This passage, in addition to several others, indicates the reality that there exists a continuous battle between good and evil in our world. As members of the Church, we are called to engage in this battle to resist the works of evil in our world and in our lives. This, then, is where we get the title of the Church Militant.

Although we do not necessarily hear this title used as frequently, we should not take it to mean that it no longer applies to the Church. In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, quoting the Pastoral Constitution on

the Church in the Modern World from the Second Vatican Council, has the following words to say:

The whole of man's history has been the story of our combat with the powers of evil, stretching, so our Lord tells us, from the very dawn of history until the last day. Finding himself in the midst of the battlefield man has to struggle to do what is right, and it is at great cost to himself, and aided by God's grace, that he succeeds in achieving his own inner integrity.<sup>1</sup>

The battle that we engage in has many different elements. On the one hand, we must always be aware of the influence that the devil and the other demons have in trying to distract us from staying on the narrow path that leads to Heaven. The Church offers many weapons in our struggle against this enemy, including various sacramentals and prayers, such as the Prayer to St. Michael the Archangel which we recite after the dismissal at every Mass here in our diocese.

The demonic is not the only enemy that we face in this battle. One of the more challenging enemies that we face is ourselves. Even though original sin has been removed from us on the day of our Baptism, we are still weakened in our human nature and are inclined to give in more easily

to those weaknesses and commit sin. It is therefore necessary that we not just focus on the devil in our struggle, but that we prepare ourselves well to combat those elements within ourselves.

One of the classic works of spirituality in this area is a book titled *The Spiritual Combat*, attributed to a 16<sup>th</sup> century priest by the name of Father Lorenzo Scupoli. The great spiritual author St. Francis de Sales carried a copy of this book with him for 18 years and would read a portion of it each day. In this book, Scupoli identifies “four weapons without which it is impossible to gain the victory in this spiritual combat: distrust of one's self, confidence in God, proper use of the faculties of body and mind, and the duty of prayer.”<sup>2</sup>

With regard to these weapons, we can turn to the figure of St. John the Baptist as a model worthy of imitating. The final words from today's Gospel highlight the attitude that we should all have, an attitude which parallels the first two weapons of distrust of self and trust in God. St. John the Baptist said these following words: “He must increase, I must decrease” (John 3:30). Humility must be a virtue that we seek to grow in constantly, being ever mindful of Christ's words that “without me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). It is therefore imperative that we place all of our

trust in God's power to aid us in this struggle and not rely on our own merits and abilities.

In addition to the example of St. John the Baptist, we can also turn to St. Joseph as a powerful intercessor and model for us in our battle. In a recent Angelus address, Pope Francis comments on St. Joseph, describing him as a "good man."<sup>3</sup> He demonstrates openness to God's will which results in a profound experience of freedom as he placed all of his trust in God and not in himself. The Holy Father also explained that St. Joseph never allowed himself to give in to hatred and bitterness, an attitude that we can sometimes easily fall into when we see the many faults of others, whether it be the government, other organizations, or individuals. These attitudes are counterproductive and are like a poison to our souls which prohibit us from making true progress in that struggle toward holiness.

In an address to members of the College of Cardinals in May of 2012, Pope Benedict XVI said that "in this struggle it is very important to have friends."<sup>4</sup> As we are gathered together today for the second annual Western Illinois Catholic Men's Prayer Breakfast, we thank the Lord for the friendship that we have with the saints like St. John the Baptist and St. Joseph, in addition to one another to aid us in this challenging journey. We

unite with Christ and one another in our reception of the Eucharist as it nourishes us to push forward with confidence that we will share in the victory. As Pope Benedict reminded the cardinals in his address to them: “We are on the Lord’s team, hence on the winning team.” Let us persevere in this battle by remaining faithful to Christ and His Church, for we have great trust that at the end of our journey, we will be welcomed into the joy of the victory that has already been won for us.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> CCC 409; *Gaudium et Spes* 37.

<sup>2</sup> Scupoli, Lorenzo, *The Spiritual Combat*, Chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, Angelus Address, 22 December 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, , *Luncheon with the Cardinals*, 21 May 2012.