

"From whom do I have to defend myself? What must I do? Paul tells us to put on God's full armor, meaning that God acts as a defense, helping us to resist Satan's temptations. Is this clear? No spiritual life, no Christian life is possible without resisting temptations, without putting on God's armor which gives us strength and protects us."

"Saint Paul underlines that our battle is not against little things but against the principalities and the ruling forces, in other words against the devil and his followers. "But in this generation, like so many others, people have been led to believe that the devil is a myth, a figure, an idea, the idea of evil.

"But the devil exists and we must fight against him. Paul tells us this, it's not me saying it! The Word of God is telling us this. But we're not all convinced of this. And then Paul describes God's armor and which are the different types that make up this great armor of God. And he says: 'So stand your ground, with truth a belt around your waist.' The truth is God's armor."

Francis reminded us that the Devil is a Liar - and we must resist him with the truth and use our faith as a shield because the devil "doesn't throw flowers at us but instead burning arrows."

This homily reminded me of a similar homily he preached last year, on one of several clear Gospel texts in which we read the teaching of Jesus on the devil. In reflecting on the Gospel of St Luke, Francis proclaimed these words:

"Life is a military endeavor. Christian life is a battle, a beautiful battle, because when God emerges victorious in every step of our life, this gives us joy, a great happiness: the joy that the Lord is the victor within us, with his free gift of salvation. But we're all a bit lazy, aren't we, in this battle and we allow ourselves to get carried away by our passions, by various temptations. That's because we're sinners, all of us! But don't get discouraged. Have courage and strength because the Lord is with us."

"When Jesus had driven out a demon, some of the crowd said: "By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons." Others, to test him, asked him for a sign from heaven. But he knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste and house will fall against house. And if Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that it is by Beelzebul that I drive out demons. If I, then, drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people drive them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

"But if it is by the finger of God that I drive out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man fully armed guards his palace, his possessions are safe. But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him, he takes away the armor on which he relied and distributes the spoils. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

"When an unclean spirit goes out of someone, it roams through arid regions searching for rest but, finding none, it says, 'I shall return to my home from which I came.' But upon returning, it finds it swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and brings back seven other spirits more wicked than itself who move in and dwell there, and the last condition of that man is worse than the first." (Luke 11:15-26)

The passage from Luke is one of many Gospel texts which clearly reveal the undeniable claim that the devil is not only real - but that the devil is our enemy precisely because he is the enemy of Jesus Christ - and we belong to Jesus Christ. This Pope does not simply allude to the reality of spiritual warfare, he reminds us all of it is real and teaches us to engage in it.

He makes clear to all of us not only that the devil is real - and that Jesus Christ truly confronted him - he makes it clear that all who bear the name Christian in this hour face real demonic opposition. He reminds us that we have been equipped for the battle and reminds us that we must engage in it!

This man who took the name Francis when he was chosen to assume the Chair of Peter, simply does what his namesake, the little poor man of Assisi, did quite regularly - he calls all who listen to his words to take the task of spiritual warfare seriously and to learn how to engage in it effectively.

To the chagrin of some who think all this talk of the devil is silly or outdated - but to the great dismay of the demons of hell itself - Pope Francis speaks clearly of the existence of the devil. He calls all Christians to take the Bible passages that mention the devil seriously. He speaks directly about the fact that spiritual warfare is part of the Christian life and mission. We all need to hear his message and respond - every day!

In his introduction to *The Screwtape Letters*, a brilliant work exposing the unseen spiritual warfare taking place around all of us which uses a series of letters between two demons - the older Screwtape, an instructor and the younger student Wormwood - the great apologist CS Lewis wrote:

"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

We are engaged in a spiritual war for the souls of men and women in this urgent hour. The Evil One is a thief who seeks to kill and destroy. (See, John 10:10) We face very real personal opposition from the devil in our own lives - and it is all around us. We must always remember that the struggle we face, even though it works itself out on so many different fronts, is, at root, a spiritual one, and requires spiritual weapons. That is why the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus:

"Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood; but against the principalities, against the

powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." (Eph. 6:12,13)

He also wrote these words to the Christians in Corinth: "For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds." (2 Cor. 10:4,5)

The successor of Peter, Francis, speaks to you and me. Let's consider more of what he had to say last year in the homily I mentioned above on the passage from St Luke. It was pretty blunt. He addressed them specifically to priests but, as a Deacon who regularly preaches, I know they apply to deacons as well:

"There are some priests who, when they read this Gospel passage, this and others say: 'But, Jesus healed a person with a mental illness'. They do not read this, no? It is true that at that time, they could confuse epilepsy with demonic possession; but it is also true that there was the devil!

And we do not have the right to simplify the matter, as if to say: 'All of these (people) were not possessed; they were mentally ill'. No! The presence of the devil is on the first page of the Bible, and the Bible ends as well with the presence of the devil, with the victory of God over the devil."

This invitation to not downplay, minimize or confuse the FACT of the existence of the devil is refreshing! Pope Francis challenged all of us to not be naive when we are faced with the temptation to "to diminish the power of the Lord."

He proclaimed, "There is always the temptation to want to diminish the figure of Jesus, as if he were "a healer at most" and so as not to take him "so seriously".

Sadly, that temptation has made its way into too many homilies. Even worse, it has made its way into our daily lives as Christians. We often behave like the materialist to which CS Lewis referred.

As is his custom, the Holy Father broke up his homily, as he breaks many of his instructions, into three parts. He gave us three ways in which we all can fight the evil one as he manifests his perfidious plans in our own lives and in our own age.

We must recognize the truth of his existence. We must recognize our allies in the battle. We must recognize the ongoing nature of the struggle - so that we are ready when it comes to do battle.

Here are more of his words:

"Do not confuse the truth. Jesus fights the devil: first criterion.

"Second criterion: he who is not with Jesus is against Jesus. There are no attitudes in the

middle.

"Third criterion: vigilance over our hearts because the devil is astute. He is never cast out forever. It will only be so on the last day."

"Vigilance, because his strategy is this: 'You became Christian. Advance in your faith. I will leave you. I will leave you tranquil. But then when you are used to not being so watchful and you feel secure, I will come back'. The Gospel today begins with the devil being cast out and ends with the devil coming back! St. Peter would say: 'It is like a fierce lion that circles us'. It is like that."

'But, Father, you a little ancient. You are frightening us with these things' No, not me! It is the Gospel! And these are not lies: it is the Word of the Lord! Let us ask the Lord for the grace to take these things seriously. He came to fight for our salvation. He won against the devil! Please, let us not do business with the devil! He seeks to return home, to take possession of us. Do not relativize; be vigilant! And always with Jesus!"

The passage Francis referred to in his homily, comparing the devil to a roaring lion, is found in the first letter which the Apostle Peter wrote to the early Church. The Christians had already been dispersed due to a violent and hostile persecution against them. That persecution was led by some in that culture who did not like their message or their manner of life. Here is a snippet from the letter:

"Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you." (1 Peter 5:8-10)

The struggle in which we are engaged today in our current collapsing culture concerns a clash of worldviews and competing definitions of human freedom and flourishing. It concerns the very nature of marriage, the structuring of our relationships with one another, and the definition and obligations of love itself!

Christians (at least orthodox, faithful ones) are routinely presented as unenlightened, as somehow forcing our view on others. Our positions on the dignity of every human life, marriage, family, the nature and demands of authentic freedom, the nature of truth as being objective - are all what will actually free the people of our age from the bondage of disordered appetites and the emptiness they bring about in people's lives. These truths are objectively true for all men and women.

And the enemy of the Truth is the devil.

In this age of relativism, there are a growing number of folks who do not like us even making such a claim. Yet, the truth is still true. We were made for relationship. We were structured for authentic love and human flourishing within true marriage - and called to build a society founded

upon the family. We were created by God, in His Image, and we will never find authentic happiness or human flourishing until we embrace His loving plan in our own lives.

We are living in a new missionary age. Pope Francis is reminding us regularly - and for good reason - that the devil is real. Also, he is reminding us that the Devil is our enemy. The Evil One hates Jesus Christ and hates all who bear His name and continue His redemptive mission by living their lives in the heart of the Church for the sake of the world.

In the first centuries of Christian history, the Christian Way of Life transformed Christianity from being about a small sect following a Jewish Messiah into becoming the major dominating faith of the age, turning the world upside down with their message. It transformed the world of the First Millennium and the world of the Second. It can and it will do the same in the world of Third Millennium. History will record that "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also." (See, Acts 17:6)

We must not forget that we have a real adversary in the devil. We must be alert. We must fight! Thank God we have a courageous Pope who continues to remind us of that fact. Now, let's take it to heart and engage in spiritual warfare.

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