LESSON 1 Why did my parents make me come?

INTRODUCTION

*Retreat Overview*

We all remember Samson. He was one of the Judges, or rulers, of Ancient Israel after the Exodus and before the reign of King David. He was famous for his physical strength.

We all remember that he killed a lion with his bare hands, and that he wreaked havoc among the enemies of God’s people, even destroying 1000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey as his only weapon. But we sometimes forget the Bible’s explanation of how Samson was able to perform such amazing feats.

The Scriptures actually point out, before each of his victories over the enemies of God, that “... the spirit of the Lord rushed upon Samson” (Judges 14:6). The spirit of the Lord was the source of Samson’s strength.

The spirit of the Lord was also the source of King David’s greatness. When the prophet Samuel anointed him as the future king of Israel, the Scriptures use the same phrase as they used to describe what happened to Samson:

*Then Samuel, with the horn of oil in hand, anointed him in the midst of his brothers, and from that day on, the spirit of the LORD rushed upon David.*

– 1 Samuel 16:13, NABRE

In spite of their sins and failings, God gave Samson and David a mission to fulfill in the history of salvation. And he also gave them the power to fulfill that mission — he poured his own divine spirit into their hearts and minds. When we were baptized, each of us received a mission as well. And when we were confirmed, God poured his spirit into our souls to give us the strength we need to fulfill that mission.

That’s what this Retreat Guide, *Strength of Thousands: A Retreat Guide on the Sacrament of Confirmation*, is all about.

In the First Meditation, we will look at what this mission really is.

In the Second Meditation, we will look at what happens in our own lives when we accept and live out this mission.

And in the Conference, we will look at one of Our Lord’s best-known parables in order to discover how to release the full power of the Holy Spirit in our souls.

To begin, let’s turn the attention of hearts to the Lord, who is already thinking of us, and eager to spend this time with us. Let’s ask him for all the graces we need, most especially, the grace to experience in a new and deeper way, the onrush of the spirit of the Lord, who comes to give each one us the strength of thousands.

FIRST MEDITATION

*What’s Your Mission?*

The sacrament of confirmation is the final sacrament of initiation into the Church, the Christian family, the sacrament through which we receive a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit that strengthens us to fulfill our Christian mission in this crazy, wonderful world.

Every year, the Church celebrates the coming of
the Holy Spirit to the first Apostles on the liturgical solemnity of Pentecost. Pentecost occurs seven weeks after Easter, and on that day every Catholic church in the world performs a powerful symbolic gesture that most of us don’t even notice.

FIRST MEDITATION

*Moving the Paschal Candle*

During the seven weeks of the Easter Season, we keep the large Paschal Candle, the Easter Candle, in the sanctuaries of our churches. We light it every time Mass is celebrated.

The living flame of the Easter Candle symbolically reminds us, throughout those weeks, that Christ is
alive, that he rose from the dead to put an end to the darkness of sin, just as the sun rises each morning to put an end to the darkness of night.

The tall, white candle with a burning flame on top
also reminds us of God’s faithfulness throughout all of history, because it also symbolizes the two miraculous pillars — a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of re
by night — that guided the ancient Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, through the desert, and into the Promised Land.

INTRODUCTION / FIRST MEDITATION

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Now it is Christ, the Risen Lord, who is our pillar of smoke and pillar of re, our sure guide out of slavery to sin, through this world of trials and temptations, and into the Promised Land of Heaven.

All of that, and more, is brought to mind by the bold presence in our sanctuaries of the Easter Candle, throughout the liturgical season of Easter. But then Pentecost comes along, and we pick up that symbolic Easter Candle, carry it back to the sacristy, and tuck it away in a corner. Until the following Easter, we only use it during baptismal ceremonies, when Christ’s risen life is given for the first time to new members of the Church.

FIRST MEDITATION

*Living Pillars*

Isn’t it kind of strange that we take away the Paschal Candle, symbol of Christ’s resurrection, and put it out of sight? Does this somehow symbolize that after the Easter Season, the risen Christ is no longer among us? Certainly it does not.

In fact, the living ame of the sanctuary lamp, shining humbly beside the Tabernacle, is a constant reminder of the reality of Christ’s presence among us, a reminder that he hasn’t gone on vacation and left us on our own. So why do we take the Easter Candle away? And why do we take it away every year precisely on Pentecost?

Pentecost was the day when Christ’s risen life was entrusted to the Church, was handed over to the Church, in a sense, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. As the Apostles were gathered in
the Upper Room, in Jerusalem, nine days after Christ had ascended into heaven, the Bible tells us that

*... suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it lled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of re, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all lled with the holy Spirit...*

– Acts 2:2-4, NABRE

At that moment a new era began in the history of salvation, the era of a missionary Church, a Church that, strengthened and guided by the Holy Spirit, would continue the very mission of Jesus himself, the mission he entrusted to his followers with the last words he spoke before returning to heaven, when he told them:

*... you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

– Acts 1:8, NABRE

That new period in the history of salvation is highlighted every year on the feast of Pentecost, which marks a change in liturgical seasons.

It is symbolized by the removal of the Easter Candle from the sanctuary, because with the coming of the Holy Spirit, that light of Christ, that re of God’s love that wants to save the world, was transferred into the heart of every Christian, of each one of us.

We take the Easter Candle out of the sanctuary because we ourselves, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, have become living Easter Candles, burning ames of wisdom, pillars of smoke and re in the wilderness of this fallen world, pillars of Christian faith and love shining brightly amid the lies and sel shness of a post-Christian culture, pillars that Christ himself has sent out into the world as his ambassadors, as his messengers, as his witnesses.

That is our mission — to be, in a sense, living Easter Candles, shining Christ’s light into every corner of the world. That is why we have been given the spirit of God himself through the sacrament of con rmation.

FIRST MEDITATION

*Conclusion: Supernatural Strength*

It’s a supernatural mission, and so it requires supernatural strength, the strength of thousands. Here’s how the Catechism describes this aspect of the sacrament of con rmation:

*... it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.*

– CCC 1303

We don’t carry out this mission in isolation from the reality around us. There are spiritual forces in the fallen world that work against us, that try to discourage us, distract us, and even destroy us. St. Paul often referred to the Christian mission as a battle and a ght.

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In fact, towards the end of his life he summarized his own Christian experience by saying: “... I have fought the good ght...” (2 Timothy 4:7, Knox Translation).

In a famous chapter from his Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul described this spiritual warfare, this reason why we need the grace that comes to us from con rmation. He wrote:

*Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you
may be able to stand rm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with esh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground.*

– Ephesians 6:10-13, NABRE

In the next meditation, we will re ect on what living out this mission of being living Easter Candles can look like in our lives, but for now, let’s simply take some time to contemplate this amazing reality: Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world and Lord of the universe, has given us his own Holy Spirit and invited us to be coworkers in building up his Kingdom, the only Kingdom that will last forever. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

*Questions for Personal Re ection or Group*

When I say, “I am a Christian” or “I am a Catholic,” what do I have in mind? What do I consider to be the key ingredients in my identity as a follower of Christ?

1. 2  When I recall my experience of receiving the sacrament of con rmation, what comes most vividly to mind? Why?

How do I usually express my awareness of the
fact that I have been given a share in Christ’s own mission of leading people to salvation and holiness?

*Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation*

*Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand rm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with esh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground. So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all [the] aming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

– Ephesians 6:10-17, NABRE

*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ
Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by
his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; ful ll your ministry. For I am already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have nished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.*

– 2 Timothy 4:1-8, NABRE

*You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.*

– Matthew 5:13-16, NABRE

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FIRST MEDITATION

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SECOND MEDITATION

*The Fruits of the Spirit*

God poured the Holy Spirit into our hearts in a special way when we received the sacrament of con rmation, so that we could be his witnesses, shining in the darkness of this fallen world like Easter Candles.

We carry out that mission in many ways. Living our normal, everyday responsibilities with love, attention, and excellence is one way. As St. Paul puts it:

*Whatever you do, do from the heart, as for the Lord and not for others...*

– Colossians 3:23

What does that mean? To do everything from the heart, as for the Lord? It’s something to think about. It could mean so many things:

Being the best worker we can be at our jobs — cheerful and helpful.

Engaging in meaningful ways at home with our families, or with our friends, or in our neighborhoods and communities.

Living sacri cially, going beyond the mere call of duty, often doing more than we’ve been asked to do... It could mean so many things.

Another way of carrying out our Christian mission is to reach out to people in need — it might be a sick relative, a sorrowful friend, or an over-worked single mother.

And then there is the more direct way of sharing the gospel with people, explaining to them the things that Jesus has explained to us: how to nd real meaning and purpose in life, how to experience God’s forgiveness for past sins, and how to make a fresh start, how to avoid the pain and damage that comes from sin, from ignoring right and wrong; this too is how we shine in the darkness.

Through these behaviors and actions, which require overcoming our deep-seated tendencies to sel shness and self-absorption, we bear witness to Christ, we introduce him to people who do not yet know him, and we help those who do know him follow him more closely.

SECOND MEDITATION

*Evangelizing Culture*

And yet, there is still another way that Christians throughout history have lived this mission of being witnesses of Christ. This is the way of working creatively and courageously to glorify God and make Christ’s light shine within the very fabric of society, nding ways to re ect and encourage true Christian values through cultural activities.

When our Christian ancestors started building hospitals, orphanages, and schools, they were engaging in this form of evangelization. When they brought their Christian faith to bear as they worked in pagan government, economics, medicine, and entertainment, they were evangelizing culture, creating new social traditions that re ected the gospel message.

SECOND MEDITATION

*A Holy Discontent*

And this wasn’t just a good idea that occurred to a few talented members of the Church. It was the result of Christians allowing themselves to be guided from within by the inspirations and power of the Holy Spirit, who stirred up in their hearts what one spiritual writer has called a “holy discontent.”

These Christians perceived a need in the world around them, and they boldly went forth to meet that need, to make a difference, to redeem some sector of
their society through reshaping it in accordance with Christian values.

Throughout the history of the Church, over and over again, great works of evangelization have begun as a small stirring of the Spirit in the heart of a believer, a holy discontent that became an idea, a project, and nally, sometimes, a society-changing reality.

We, like the Christians who have gone before us,
are called to live by that same Holy Spirit, whom we received in a special way through the sacrament of con rmation. We are called to give our Christian mission the importance it deserves: in our daily duties, in our relationships, and in responding generously to whatever “holy discontent” God may stir up in our hearts.

SECOND MEDITATION

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When we do, we allow God’s grace not only to work through us to transform the world, but also to work within us, bearing in our own lives what St. Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit.” St. Paul lists these fruits in his Letter to the Galatians:

*...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self- control.*

– Galatians 5:22-23, NABRE

That’s a portrait of spiritual maturity; it’s a portrait of sanctity. And it’s interesting that “fruit” is a natural extension of the “fruit-bearer” — an apple tree produces apples, not by force, but because it was created to

do so, and will do so if it is healthy and given the right environment. St. Paul is describing what will come to us spiritually — if we are spiritually healthy — just as fruit comes to a tree naturally. It’s not dramatic, but it’s real, and it’s ful lling — it’s what we are created for.

SECOND MEDITATION

*Witness = Martyr*

But it’s not easy. Being witnesses of Jesus Christ in the same world that cruci ed Jesus Christ brings plenty of dif culties and hardships. The word for “witness” in New Testament Greek is “martus” — it’s the same word that gives us the English word, “martyr.” To be a witness for Christ is to be a martyr. Giving up our lives instead of renouncing our faith in and friendship with Christ — this is the fullest expression of our witness to him.

Church tradition recognizes two types of martyrs. Red martyrs actually shed their blood for their faith, while white martyrs persevere in their faith through dif cult, though often hidden, trials. In both cases, that kind of faithfulness is never the result of merely human effort. Rather, it’s the result of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the very strength of Christ to bear our crosses and, if necessary, to die on them.

During the reign of the Roman empire, when it was illegal to be a Christian (because Christians refused to worship the false, pagan Roman gods), the most striking witnesses, the most convincing Christian missionaries, were often the virgin martyrs. These were young women who felt called by God to consecrate their entire lives to him, giving up even the legitimate joys of marriage and family life — they were spouses of the Lord.

At times, a powerful pagan ruler would desire one of these women, and try to cajole or threaten her into marriage. When she refused to abandon her spiritual spouse, Christ, she would be exposed as a Christian, turned in to the authorities, publicly tortured, and, if she still refused to renounce her faith, executed.

SECOND MEDITATION

*Conclusion: The Story of St. Agnes*

St. Agnes was one of these. She was just 13, from a wealthy, aristocratic Roman family, and very beautiful. All the young noblemen were vying for her hand in marriage, but she informed them that she had already consecrated herself to a heavenly husband, Jesus. At rst they laughed at her, but when she persisted they became angry and vengeful.

Knowing she was a Christian, they denounced her to the governor, hoping that interrogations and the prospect of torture would weaken her resolve. They were wrong. She resisted the governor’s subtle encouragements, reiterating that she could have no spouse but Jesus Christ. Then she resisted his threats. Then she stood rm when they lit res and wheeled out various instruments of torture and execution for her inspection, trying to intimidate her into renouncing her faith.

Exasperated, the governor had her sent to a brothel, and announced that the Roman youth were to have their way with her free of charge. But her countenance shone with such an otherworldly light that the scores of eager pro igates dared not approach her. Finally, she explained to the governor that “You may stain your sword with my blood, but you will never be able to profane my body, consecrated to Christ.”

The entire city was in an uproar by this time, and the governor, perturbed by the courageous affronts of such a young girl, gave up his attempts to overturn her faith, and executed her. Tradition tells us that she went to her execution more joyfully than most people go to their weddings. To this very day, the entire Church celebrates the anniversary of her martyrdom every January 21st.

Most of us don’t have to live out our faith on the dramatic sharp-end of the sword, true enough. But
we do have to make hard choices to be faithful to our Christian mission in the day-to-day realities of our lives — choices like every Christian martyr has had to make.

SECOND MEDITATION

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The martyrs found the strength to make those choices not in themselves, but in God — and we can do the same. The opening prayer of St. Agnes’s anniversary Mass points this out:

*Almighty ever-living God, who choose what is weak in the world to confound the strong, mercifully grant, that we, who celebrate the heavenly birthday of your Martyr Saint Agnes, may follow her constancy in the faith.*

Yes, we know that we are weak: we are often careless in our Christian duties, cowardly in defending our Lord, and hesitant to respond to the holy discontent that God stirs up in our hearts.

But God knows that. It’s why he has granted us the gift of the Holy Spirit, to give us a supernatural constancy, to give us a reservoir of wisdom and courage that will never run dry, to give us — if only we are willing to accept it — the strength of thousands.

In the conference we will look at three challenges that can drain that reservoir, but for now, let’s take a few minutes to consider, prayerfully, what it really means to be Christ’s witness, his martyrs, and to stir up our desire for the fruit the Spirit brings when we allow him to guide our lives. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

*Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion*

1. How well do I tend to fulfill the basic responsibilities of my daily life? To what extent do I follow St. Paul’s maxim: “... whatever you do, do for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).
2. How sensitive am I to the needs of those around me, both my close friends and relatives, and also the people in my community and the larger society? What effect does this admonition of Jesus have in my daily life: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40)?
3. Is God perhaps stirring up a “holy discontent” in my heart? If so, how am I responding?

*Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation*

*I will sprinkle clean water over you to make you clean; from all your impurities and from all your idols I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your esh and give you a heart of esh. I will put my spirit within you so that you walk in my statutes, observe my ordinances, and keep them. You will live in the land I gave to your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God...*

– Ezekiel 36:25-28, NABRE

*For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do
not use this freedom as an opportunity for the esh; rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is ful lled in one statement, namely, “You shall
love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another. I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the esh. For the esh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the esh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want. But if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the esh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of sel shness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have cruci ed their esh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit,
let us also follow the Spirit. Let us not be conceited, provoking one another, envious of one another.*

– Galatians 5:13-26 NABRE

*[After Jesus’ resurrection...] While meeting with them, he [Jesus] enjoined them [his Apostles] not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; for
John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the holy Spirit.” When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

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SECOND MEDITATION

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*...*

CONFERENCE

*God Is Faithful*

In the First place, he wanted us to understand that he is faithful. In the parable, he is the sower, and the seed is the Word of God, the grace of God, the action of God in our lives.

God loves us, and he wants us to live life in the Holy Spirit, to live life to the full, to bear the fruit of the Spirit. And so, he is constantly sending us grace, constantly working in our souls, constantly inviting us to follow him along the path of holiness.

This is, in fact, one of the reasons that he invented the seven sacraments. In each sacrament, he guarantees to send grace into our lives, to link us more closely to himself and to the Church.

The effect of the sacraments, including the sacrament of confirmation, doesn’t depend on the holiness of the priest, or on the intensity of our feelings, or on the beauty of the celebration; it depends on God’s promise to use each sacrament as an instrument to touch our lives. God is faithful and dependable — the grace of the sacraments is real, as real as the seed that the sower went out to sow.

CONFERENCE

*God Respects Our Freedom*

And yet, the seed will not grow and bear fruit all on its own. It requires good soil. This aspect of the parable points to the necessity of our free response to God’s action in our lives.

He loves us so much that he actually respects our freedom. He will not force his grace upon us; he will not force his friendship upon us — we have to open ourselves up to receive it. The good soil of the parable is an
image of an open heart, a “generous and good heart,” a “persevering” heart, as Jesus himself explains (Luke 8:15).

The more we meditate on this comparison, the
more powerful it becomes. Think about it. A seed without soil, without a place to grow — what can
it do? Nothing. It will remain unfulfilled, unfruitful, undeveloped. And soil without a seed, what can it do? Nothing. It will remain barren, unproductive, lifeless. Only together do the seed and the soil each reach their full potential and fulfill their purpose.

*He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses*

*in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to
the ends of the earth”... When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of re, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.*

CONFERENCE

*The Parable of the Sower*

– Acts 1:4-8, NABRE

At the beginning of his public life, Jesus taught his followers about three ways that the power he gives to us through the Holy Spirit can be stifled. He taught this lesson in his parable of the Sower. Let’s read it over together, in the version that we find in the Gospel of St. Matthew.

*On that day, Jesus went out of the house and sat down by the sea. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. Whoever has ears ought to hear.”*

– Matthew 13:1-9, NABRE

One of the great things about this parable is that Jesus himself explained its meaning to us, in great detail — we know exactly what he was trying to teach us.

SECOND MEDITATION / CONFERENCE

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And that’s how it is in our relationship with God. On the one hand, God has chosen to make his grace and salvation depend on our cooperation. On the other hand, we have been created in such a way that we will never find the fulfillment we yearn for except in welcoming God’s grace and friendship.

The power of the Holy Spirit is guaranteed to yield its fruit in our lives, but only insofar as we accept it and activate it, just as the soil accepts and activates the seed.

CONFERENCE

*The Ancient Enemy: The Devil*

But Jesus has more to tell us in the parable. Yes, we are free to accept or reject God’s action in our lives, and God lovingly respects that freedom, but we are not alone.

Three outside factors influence our freedom, impeding the action of God in our lives, if we let them, and sapping the power of the Spirit; Jesus warns us about them in this parable.

The First influence is the devil, represented by the birds that eat up the seed that falls on the path.

The devil is real. He and his army of fallen angels hate God and God’s followers. They negatively influenced our first parents, Adam and Eve, successfully tempting them to disobey God’s commandments, thereby breaking off their friendship with God.

The devil wants to do the same thing to us. So he is always planting doubts and deceptions in our minds:

God won’t mind if you sin just this once (as if sin were not a source of damage to the soul);

God won’t be able to forgive that sin (as if God’s mercy were somehow limited);

You don’t really need the sacraments , you can grow spiritually on your own, in your own way, all by yourself (as if God’s gift of the sacraments was some kind of mistake)...

He uses subtle lies like these to turn our hearts away from the life-giving truth and love of the Gospel.

CONFERENCE

*Our Fallen Nature: “The Flesh”*

The second negative influence that Our Lord mentions in this parable is our own tendency to laziness and comfort, an aspect of our fallen nature, what St. Paul often refers to as “the flesh.”

In the parable, this factor is represented by the rocky soil, which impedes the growing plant from finding moisture when it is suffering under the heat of a pounding sun.

Many times, welcoming God’s grace and obeying the inspirations of the Holy Spirit require self-sacrifice. Many times, following Christ along the path of meaning and fulfillment requires taking on a share of Christ’s cross. But our ingrained love for comfort and self- indulgence resists self-sacrifice.

Unless we lovingly overcome that resistance, unless we rise above those inclinations to spiritual laziness, the work of the Holy Spirit in our souls will be cut short; it will dry up.

CONFERENCE

*A Corrosive Culture: The World*

The third influence is the world around us, the culture that is a product of our fallen human nature.

This is represented in the parable by the thorn bushes, which grow up side by side with the good grain, but steal all the nutrients from the soil, so that the seed never has a chance to grow to full maturity and bear its fruit.

Just so, if we allow ourselves to be swept up into the false ideals of the anti-Christian culture all around us, our missionary identity will never grow to maturity, and we will never experience to the full the fruit of the Spirit, which God so eagerly wants us to experience.

This fallen world promises happiness through money, or personal achievements, or successful careers, or popularity, or self-indulgent pleasures. And so it invites us to invest our talents and creativity and time in pursuing those things above all else, even to the detriment of our true mission — the mission of being Christ’s witnesses.

CONFERENCE

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But the promise of the fallen world is a false promise; those things, good as they may seem, cannot give us the satisfaction that we truly yearn for, because God alone satisfies the human heart.

As one of my favorite lines from the Catechism puts it: “Man was created to live in communion with God, in whom he finds happiness” (CCC 45). Another line from the Catechism puts it beautifully as well:

*The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God
will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for...*

– CCC 27

If we truly want to experience the power of the Holy Spirit working in us and through us, if we truly want to feel the “Spirit of the Lord rush upon” us, as he rushed upon Samson, and King David, and so many of our fellow Christians through the centuries, then we need to firmly decide:

To root out our inordinate attachments to the promises of the fallen world;

To persevere in doing what is right and true and good, even when it means carrying our crosses alongside Jesus;

And to turn away from the lies of the devil by filling our minds every day with the truth of God’s love through prayer, and study, and good spiritual reading.

CONFERENCE

*A Post-Modern Parable*

But the parable has yet another lesson — a lesson especially important for our digital age.

We have seen that the first threat to God’s grace is the devil — represented in the parable by the birds that pick the seed up off the path. If we look more closely, however, we see that the devil only had a chance to nibble up those seeds because the soil on the path was hardened and packed down. The seed couldn’t sink into that soil; it just stayed on the surface, where it was trampled on and exposed to the birds.

This is an image of the superficial soul, the person who never takes time to reflect, to contemplate, to think deeply; the person who lets himself be “distracted from distractions by distractions,” as T. S. Eliot put it.

In a culture more and more dominated by mass
media and digital entertainment, this is perhaps the greatest danger of all. The constant flow of images, ideas, opinions, advertisements, chats, noise, music, entertainment, news, and everything else can, if we let it, create such a quantity of traffic in our minds that we become unable to savor truth and let it sink deeply into our hearts, even on the off chance that we recognize it amidst the din.

“My sheep know my voice,” said Jesus (John 10:27). But how can we hear His voice when we’re surrounded by so much noise, and so many other voices clamoring to lead us? The same mind we use all day long, the one we fill with idle chatter and sensationalistic news and everything else — that’s the same mind we bring to prayer.

Unless we make room for silence, recollection, and depth in our lives, the graces God constantly sends us will bounce on the top of the beaten track and sit there, easy pickings for the devil.

CONFERENCE

*Conclusion: A More Abundant Life*

Jesus has given us this instruction, this parable, because he wants us to know what sorts of things will limit the full power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Understanding what hinders us will help us to avoid those things, so that we can truly experience what he so passionately wants to give us — a more abundant life. Those were his very words, John 10:10: “I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly!”

Take a few minutes now to prayerfully reflect on the personal questionnaire, which is designed to help you cultivate the soil of your heart.

*Personal Questionnaire*

1 How firmly do I believe that “At every time in every place, God draws close” to me (CCC 1)? How does this conviction affect my daily life?

CONFERENCE

2 What is my mission in life, and how do I feel about it?

3 Pope Francis wrote the following sentences in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. How do they apply to my life?

*There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is
not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved.*

– EG 6

4  Pope Francis wrote that “When the Church summons Christians to take up the task of evangelization, she is simply pointing to the source of authentic personal fulfillment” (EG 10). What does that mean for me?

5  What lies about myself and my relationship with God have I sometimes believed? What truths of the gospel can help me reject those lies?

6  How do I generally respond to difficulties and challenges that come my way when I am trying to be faithful to my Christian mission in the world?

7 Which crosses (self-sacrifices) are hardest for me to bear, and why?

8 How deeply rooted in my soul is the thorn bush of inordinately desiring material wealth and security?

9  How deeply rooted in my soul is the thorn bush of inordinately wanting to be liked and praised and flattered by other people?

10  How deeply rooted in my soul is the thorn bush of thinking that unless I achieve visible success my life will have no lasting meaning?

LESSON 2 Creation of the Universe a whole new perspective.

### God

**CREED:**

**I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth**

**One God**

God gave himself the name “I AM WHO AM” or YHWH (Yahweh) *(Exodus 3:14).* The divine name is mysterious, just as God is a mystery. It is at once a name revealed and the refusal of a name (Catechism 206).

Some of God’s Characteristics (Catechism 213-218):

“If you understood Him, He would not be God” *(St Augustine;* Catechism *230).* Our minds cannot truly comprehend God’s infinite and eternal characteristics, but there are some characteristics of God that we can describe in human terms.

1. God is *perfection*.

Unless we can create the whole universe out of nothing, then perhaps giving advice to God is not such a wise idea.

2. God is *without origin and without end.*

No one created God; He has always been here. There was never anything that came before God; He has no beginning and no end. God is the only being who has always existed.

There is only one being, God, who can claim not to have been created and who was responsible for creating everything else. No one or nothing else is worthy of our worship and praise.

*Group Discussion: Close your eyes and spend some time visualizing the fact that no one created God. He has always existed. Nothing came before him and nothing created him.*

3. All creatures *receive all that they are and have from Him*.

With the exception of sin, everything that exists came from God. We have God to thank for all that is good in this world.

4. God is *slow to anger.*

We are lucky to have such a good and compassionate God. God is more patient and loving than the best human parent. He loves us when we are good, and He loves us when we are bad.

5. God is *truth*.

God’s words cannot deceive. That is why one can abandon oneself in full trust. God cannot lie, because He is Truth.

6. God is *love*.

God is never cruel. God loves us no matter how many mistakes we make. He is always ready to forgive us. God never turns away from us. He can live anywhere in the universe, and He chooses your heart.

**God Is Our Ultimate Goal** (Catechism 222-229)

Faith in God leads us to turn to Him alone as our ultimate goal, neither to prefer anything to Him, nor to substitute anything for Him. God put us in the world to know, love, and serve Him, and so to come to paradise(Catechism 1721).

True happiness is not found in riches or wellbeing, in human fame or power, or in any human achievement, but in God alone, the source of every good and of all love (Catechism 1723).

Cars are built to run on gasoline. Even if we wanted to operate our car on something cheaper, such as water, we cannot. No wishful thinking on our part will change the fact that the car needs gas to run. In much the same way, God designed human beings to run on Him alone. If we try to replace God with other things in this world, we will not find lasting contentment.

There is an empty place in our heart that can only be filled with God. People often spend their lives trying to fill this hole with everything but God, to no avail. There is a certain loneliness that we will experience until we fill this hole in our heart with God.

*Group Discussion: Name some things of this world with which we try to fill our hearts.*

#### A Prayer from St Nicholas of Flue:

My Lord and my God,

Take from me everything that distances me from you.

Give me everything that brings me closer to you.

Detach me from myself to give my all to you.

*Group Discussion: Why do you think God created us?*

**Taking Time for God**

A quote from Thomas Merton’s “No Man Is an Island”:

If we have no silence, God is not heard in our music.

If we have no rest, God does not bless our work.

If we twist our lives out of shape in order to fill every corner of them with action and experience, God will silently withdraw from our hearts and leave us empty.

Perhaps the most valuable thing we can give our children is our time *(Brian Tracy).* When we spend quality time with our children and spouse, we grow close to them and show them how much we love them. In much the same way we need to spend time with God in prayer to develop a relationship with Him.

**The Father**

No one is without a family; we are all part of God’s family.

1. God made us His sons and daughters through Jesus Christ (Catechism 294; Eph 1:5-6).
2. Jesus taught us to call God our Father (Matt 6:9).
3. From the cross Jesus gave us Mary to be our mother (John 19:26).
4. By becoming human, Jesus became our Brother (Heb 2:14).

Jesus asks for childlike abandonment to the providence of our heavenly Father, who takes care of His children’s smallest needs (Catechism 305).

“Don’t worry about things - food, drink and clothes...Your heavenly Father already knows perfectly well what you need, and he will give them to you if you give him first place in your life and live as he wants you to. . . .So don’t be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time" (Matthew 6:25-34).

**The Almighty**

Webster’s definition is “all powerful."

Hold it fixed in our minds that nothing is impossible for God (Catechism 274*).*

Many miracles defy the laws of nature, but God is far above the ordinary laws of physics. They are subject to Him, as is the rest of His creation.

Purificar las imágenes falsas de Dios es importante. Mientras no tengamos una imagen verdadera de Dios, le seguiremos achacando las faltas que no son de Él y seguiremos disfrazando nuestras incoherencias.

IMAGENES DE DIOS



LESSON 3 Creation – Big Bang, Chaos to Cosmos, Was my great grand father a Chimpanzee?

<https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/video/reflections-on-original-sin/305/>

This Video will help you prepare for more than one lesson THIS VIDEO IS A MUST.

# The Genesis Problem

[**BISHOP ROBERT BARRON**](http://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/author/frbarron/)**FEBRUARY 26, 2011**

I’m continually amazed how often the “problem” of Genesis comes up in my work of evangelization and apologetics. What I mean is the way people struggle with the seemingly bad science that is on display in the opening chapters of the first book of the Bible. How can anyone believe that God made the visible universe in six days, that all the species were created at the same time, that light existed before the sun and moon, etc., etc? How can believers possibly square the naïve cosmology of Genesis with the textured and sophisticated theories of Newton, Darwin, Einstein, and Stephen Hawking?

One of the most important principles of Catholic Biblical interpretation is that the reader of the Scriptural texts must be sensitive to the genre or literary type of the text with which he is dealing. Just as it would be counter-indicated to read Moby Dick as history or “The Wasteland” as social science, so it is silly to interpret, say, “The Song of Songs” as journalism or the Gospel of Matthew as a spy novel. By the same token, it is deeply problematic to read the opening chapters of Genesis as a scientific treatise. If I can borrow an insight from Fr. George Coyne, a Jesuit priest and astrophysicist, no Biblical text can possibly be “scientific” in nature, since “science,” as we understand it, first emerged some fourteen centuries after the composition of the last Biblical book. The author of Genesis simply wasn’t doing what Newton, Darwin, Einstein, and Hawking were doing; he wasn’t attempting to explain the origins of things in the characteristically modern manner, which is to say, on the basis of empirical observation, testing of hypotheses, marshalling of evidence, and experimentation. Therefore, to maintain that the opening chapters of Genesis are “bad science” is a bit like saying “The Iliad” is bad history or “The Chicago Tribune” is not very compelling poetry.

So what precisely was that ancient author trying to communicate? Once we get past the “bad science” confusion, the opening of the Bible gives itself to us in all of its theological and spiritual power. Let me explore just a few dimensions of this lyrical and evocative text. We hear that Yahweh brought forth the whole of created reality through great acts of speech: “Let there be light,’ and there was light; ‘Let the dry land appear’ and so it was.” In almost every mythological cosmology in the ancient world, God or the gods establish order through some act of violence. They conquer rival powers or they impose their will on some recalcitrant matter. (How fascinating, by the way, that we still largely subscribe to this manner of explanation, convinced that order can be maintained only through violence or the threat of violence). But there is none of this in the Biblical account. God doesn’t subdue some rival or express his will through violence. Rather, through a sheerly generous and peaceful act of speech, he gives rise to the whole of the universe. This means that the most fundamental truth of things—the metaphysics that governs reality at the deepest level—is peace and non-violence. Can you see how congruent this is with Jesus’ great teachings on non-violence and enemy love in the Sermon on the Mount? The Lord is instructing his followers how to live in accord with the elemental grain of the universe.

Secondly, we are meant to notice the elements of creation that are explicitly mentioned in this account: the heavens, the stars, the sun, the moon, the earth itself, the sea, the wide variety of animals that roam the earth. Each one of these was proposed by various cultures in the ancient world as objects of worship. Many of the peoples that surrounded Israel held sky, stars, sun, moon, the earth, and various animals to be gods. By insisting that these were, in fact, created by the true God, the author of Genesis was, not so subtly, de-throning false claimants to divinity and disallowing all forms of idolatry. Mind you, the author of Genesis never tires of reminding us that everything that God made is good (thus holding off all forms of dualism, Manichaeism and Gnosticism), but none of these good things is the ultimate good.

A third feature that we should notice is the position and role of Adam, the primal human, in the context of God’s creation. He is given the responsibility of naming the animals , “all the birds of heaven and all the wild beasts” (Gen. 2:20). The Church fathers read this as follows: naming God’s creatures in accord with the intelligibility placed in them by the Creator, Adam is the first scientist and philosopher, for he is, quite literally, “cataloguing” the world he sees around him. (Kata Logon means “according to the word”). From the beginning, the author is telling us, God accords to his rational creatures the privilege of participating, through their own acts of intelligence, in God’s intelligent ordering of the world. This is why, too, Adam is told, not to dominate the world, but precisely to “cultivate and care for it” (Gen. 2: 16), perpetuating thereby the non-violence of the creative act.

These are, obviously, just a handful of insights among the dozens that can be culled from this great text. My hope is that those who are tripped up by the beginning of the book of Genesis can make a small but essential interpretive adjustment and see these writings as they were meant to be seen: not as primitive science, but as exquisite theology.



<https://www.enticonfio.org/temas-confirmacion/>

DIOS EXISTE TEMA 3

El objeto de este tema es percatarnos de que la existencia de Dios no es una cuestión de "mera

fe"; sino que existen muchas razones para creer. Tenemos una capacidad racional con la que podemos

y debemos preguntarnos por el sentido de la vida, por el más allá de la muerte y por el origen del mundo.

La Iglesia Católica afirmó en el Concilio Vaticano I que la existencia de Dios es racionalmente

demostrable.

1º SI DIOS NO EXISTE, NADA SE EXPLICA

- "¿Por qué existe el ser, más bien que la nada?" (Heidegger).

¿Cuál es el origen del mundo y de la materia? Las cosas

que vemos no son eternas. La materia es algo imperfecto, finito y

limitado; es decir, algo que no puede explicarse por sí mismo, ya

que no tiene en ella su razón de ser y necesita de otra cosa para

explicar su existencia.

Basta comprobar que las cosas que vemos, se explican

unas por otras (así, una mesa se explica por un árbol, y éste, por

una semilla, etc...); pero es evidente que no se puede seguir

indefinidamente con esta cadena, pues si no existiese un Ser,

(Dios), que no necesita de otro para explicarse y por el cual se

explican los demás, entonces no existiría nada (nunca hubiese

comenzado la cadena).

Se podrá responder que la materia está ahí y que para qué

meternos en más profundidades. Pero, esa no es respuesta, porque

pensamos que no podemos renunciar a la razón humana como el

camino para descubrir la verdad.

- "¿Por qué existe el orden, más bien que el caos?".

Se ha hecho famosa la frase de Einstein: "Lo más incomprensible del universo es que sea tan

comprensible". Lo que quiere decir es que, quizás, hemos perdido la capacidad de admirarnos ante el

orden maravilloso del universo y la naturaleza.

Es significativa la anécdota que se le refiere al famoso entomólogo francés Fabre. Se propuso

un día saber con exactitud qué perfil de la tapadera de una celdilla de panal de abeja convendría más,

combinando la mayor resistencia con el mínimo de cera empleada. Con la tabla de logaritmos en la mano

se llegó a pensar que la obra de la abeja tenía un cierto error y era mejorable. Al cabo de unos meses

salta la noticia de que la tabla de logaritmos tenía un cierto error; el investigador, con la nueva tabla,

vuelve a hacer el cálculo y ¡las abejas tenían razón!. Podríamos seguir con una multitud de ejemplos,

pero basta con que nos fijemos en la maravilla de orden que supone el cuerpo humano. ¿De dónde

proviene semejante orden y perfección?

Para explicar todo esto, ¿podríamos recurrir al azar o a la casualidad producida en una

evolución?. Pero, ¿por qué en la evolución se ha producido el orden en vez del caos, siendo así que en

una combinación de elementos al azar es infinitamente más fácil el desorden?:

No cabe duda de que la “casualidad” es el nombre que damos a nuestra ignorancia. Existe un

avance en la evolución de la naturaleza, lo cual supone que hay una Inteligencia ordenadora. Ninguno

de nosotros se creería que las pinturas de las cuevas de Altamira son el fruto de una casualidad o de un

azar en la evolución de unos elementos químicos y , ¿lo vamos a creer de una maravilla infinitamente

superior como lo es la naturaleza?.

La teoría de la evolución sigue reclamando, y aún con más fuerza, la intervención de una

Inteligencia Ordenadora. En primer lugar, como hemos dicho antes, hay que explicar la aparición de una

materia primera; y además, hay que explicar el orden creciente y cada vez más complejo en la evolución;

bien sea por una intervención de Dios en el curso de la evolución como ordenador, bien por la infusión

en la materia inicial de unas leyes que conduzcan a una evolución ordenada.

\*\*\* PROPUESTA DE REFLEXIÓN EN GRUPO

+ ¿Cómo estás acostumbrado a ver la fe: como una mera

opinión personal o, más bien, como una opción que implica un

saber sobre Dios, y que tiene unas bases racionales? Comenta esta

frase del cardenal Newman: "La fe tiene que ser lo suficientemente

oscura para ser meritoria y lo suficientemente razonable para no

ser arbitraria".

+ ¿Has perdido la capacidad de admirarte ante el orden y la

maravilla de la naturaleza?. ¿Te encuentras con espontaneidad con

Dios al contemplar las maravillas de la creación?. Lee como ayuda

Rom 1 (18-21).

2º SI NO HAY DIOS, EL HOMBRE ES UN ANIMAL.

-"Muchos dicen: ¡No hay Dios!, ¡No hay Dios!. Pues si no hay Dios... ¡No hay hombre!, ¡No

hay hombre!" (Tomás Garbizu).

Si Dios no existiese, entonces lógicamente, no creeríamos en la existencia del alma humana

(creada directamente por Dios). El hombre sería sencillamente un mamífero evolucionado que los

primates.

Difícil explicar, desde este presupuesto materialista, la dignidad del hombre: Por ejemplo, su

libertad (distinta a la de un animal que está totalmente condicionado por sus instintos) que le lleva a

decidir con una voluntad propia; difícil explicar también la genialidad del artista plasmada en una obra

de arte (cosa irrealizable por un animal que solo es capaz de hacer cosas para satisfacer sus instintos de

conservación); difícil explicar la religiosidad del hombre que, a diferencia del animal, no se sacia con lo

material, sino que se pregunta por la causa última de todo lo que ve. Sin un alma espiritual, no se

entiende que el hombre tenga la capacidad de realizar todas estas funciones que hemos citado, las cuales

no son meramente biológicas o materiales.

Si el hombre fuese pura materia, si fuera como pretende el marxismo, puro resultado de la

evolución de la materia, sin alma espiritual; entonces, no habría ningún inconveniente moral en que el

hombre fuese utilizado para cualquier fin.

\*\*\* PROPUESTA DE REFLEXIÓN EN GRUPO

+ ¿Sabes que tras el descubrimiento de América, los cazadores de esclavos pretendieron justificar

sus actividades afirmando que los indios no tenína alma?. ¿Qué lógica le ves a su razonamiento?

¿Conoces algún caso similar en la historia?

+ ¿Podemos tener certeza de la existencia del alma?

3º "SI NO HAY DIOS, TODO ESTÁ PERMITIDO". (Dostoiewski)

¿En base a qué vamos a decir lo que es moralmente bueno y malo, en el supuesto de que Dios

no exista?. Es decir, ¿en qué bases se sustenta la moral? Si Dios no existiese, todo dependería de la

posición subjetiva de cada uno. En todo caso podríamos llegar a la moral de consenso: "vamos a quedar

de acuerdo en que ésto es bueno y lo otro es malo". Moral de consenso que, evidentemente, dependería

de las modas y del ambiente.

Esta moral de consenso, al no estar basada en razones objetivas, no podemos pretender que

tenga mucho peso en nuestra conciencia; y así, no tendremos mucho reparo en violar estas normas

morales, cuando la sociedad que nos las ha dictado no nos vigila y no hay peligro de sanción. A este

respecto podemos contar los tristemente famosos sucesos del 13 de julio de 1977 en New York. A las

9'34 de la tarde se produjo un apagón eléctrico durante largas horas y se vivió una noche de terror. Al

amparo de la oscuridad 2000 comercios fueron asaltados y destruidos, con unas pérdidas de 70.000

millones. Se produjo una oleada de violaciones, y posteriormente de embarazos y abortos.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn vio en ello un símbolo de lo que es capaz la humanidad sin la luz de Dios

(comparándolo con el apagón de luz artificial de aquella noche), llegando a la misma conclusión de

Dostoiewski ("Si Dios no existe todo está permitido"); conclusión ésta, que queda reflejada en un

proverbio chino: "Una nación sin Dios, acabará siendo un pueblo de bestias".

\*\*\* PROPUESTA DE REFLEXIÓN EN GRUPO

+ ¿Tengo a Dios en cuenta cuando decido lo que es

moralmente bueno o malo?. ¿Qué es lo que influye, por el

contrario en la formación de mi criterio moral?.

+ ¿Cuáles son los argumentos que te parecen más

conviencentes para la existencia de Dios?

+ ¿Crees que el ser humano puede llegar a no sentir

inquietud alguna por el problema de la existencia de Dios?

NOTAS

GAMES

<http://www.livestrong.com/article/1006096-confirmation-games-teens/>

LESSON 4 God’s masterpiece creatures: Man and Woman.

<https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/adam-david-and-jesus/4593/>

This Homily talks about three kings Adam, David and Jesus. Relevant to this lesson is the understanding of the importance of Adam.

LESSON 5 Spiritual Realm. Angels what they are and what they are not .

 LEADER

INVISIBLE ALLIES

A Retreat Guide on St. Michael and the Angels

Written and presented by Fr. John Bartunek, LC, S.Th.D.

Produced by Coronation CoronationMedia.com

INVISIBLE ALLIES

RETREAT OVERVIEW

Angels are not human beings who have died, gone to heaven, and earned their wings. The classic Frank Capra film, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, got that part wrong. Angels are purely spiritual beings, which means they don’t have bodies; they are entirely immaterial. But it also means that their spiritual powers of intelligence and will are not limited by their dependence on the five senses, as human intelligence and will are. In the whole hierarchy of God’s creation, from atoms to rocks to plants to animals to human beings to angels, angels are the most superior creatures, the ones closest to God in their very nature.

But when God through the incarnation became man in Jesus Christ, the relationship between humans and angels changed. Angels still have the superior nature, but we have been given the grace of a more intimate friendship with God, a sharing in God’s divinity, through grace, that even the angels don’t enjoy.

In this Retreat Guide, *Invisible Allies: A Retreat Guide on St. Michael and the Angels*, we will explore, a little bit, how God wants the angels to be involved in our Christian journey, and what role they are called to play in the dramatic history of our salvation.

1. In the First and Second Meditations, we will reflect on the Church’s two liturgical celebrations dedicated to angels, and try to draw spiritual lessons for ourselves from those appearances.
2. And in the Conference, we will bring some clarity to the often ignored, exaggerated, or misunderstood reality of the fallen angels—the devil and his demons, and how they try to tangle up human affairs.

Let’s begin by quieting our souls and turning the attention of our hearts to God, who is eager to spend this time with us. Let’s ask him for all the graces we need, especially the grace of a deeper insight into God’s plan for our invisible allies, the angels.

NOTES

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FIRST MEDITATION

POWERFUL PRAISE

INTRODUCTION

The existence of angels is not a theory; it is a fact. God himself has revealed it. Angels are present and involved throughout the whole history of salvation as recorded in the Bible. They pop up all the time in the Old Testament. They appear in the Gospels multiple times, announcing the conception of St. John the Baptist, the conception and birth of Jesus, as well as his Resurrection, and giving comfort to our Lord when he is being tempted in the wilderness and in the Garden of Gethsemane. And the rest of the New Testament continually refers to the angels, especially the Book of Revelation, which gives us a glimpse of the angelic hosts in heaven.

OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND?

Clearly, angels are inextricably bound up with every chapter in the history of salvation. And yet, many Catholics rarely think about the angels. Since we normally can’t see them, because they are pure spirits, we tend to go through our daily lives as if they didn’t exist. Many of us regularly invoke the saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary, but it’s the rare Christian who spontaneously calls on our less visible allies, the angels.

That’s too bad, because if God has revealed their existence, it’s for a reason. Knowing the truth about angels and being aware of how God involves them in our lives can help us in our quest to live life to the full, to become the saints that God created us to become.

Each year, the Church dedicates two liturgical celebrations to the angels. The first one occurs on September 29th, and it commemorates and honors St. Michael, St. Gabriel, and St. Rafael, the three Archangels mentioned in the Bible.

The prayers for the Mass on that day neatly sum up the Church’s understanding of how angels fit into God’s plan for salvation

MARVELOUS MIRRORS

The opening prayer begins by calling to mind why God created angels in the first place. It starts out by saying:

a*O God, who dispose in marvelous order ministries both angelic and human …*

The phrase, “dispose in marvelous order” refers to the beauty and wisdom evident in God’s creation, beauty and wisdom that give us a little glimpse of the glory of God himself.

All of creation, from the most powerful angel to the smallest grain of sand, reflects God’s goodness and magnificence. The way that the many different creatures all live and interact within a universal harmony reflects the dynamic joy and wisdom of the Trinity’s own divine life. Here is how the Catechism explains it:

a*The order and harmony of the created world results from the diversity of beings and from the relationships which exist among them. Man discovers them progressively as the laws of nature. They call forth the admiration of scholars. The beauty of creation reflects the infinite beauty of the Creator and ought to inspire the respect and submission of man’s intellect and will.*

—CCC 341

The existence of angels, therefore, is part of God’s self-revelation; it shows us unique aspects of his power and wonder. God wants us to know him, to delight in him, to rejoice in his greatness. By telling us about the angelic realm, which is not available for simple observation, like the rest of creation, he opens up for us new dimensions of awe, admiration, and praise. Just as we are filled with a deep sense of meaning, vitality, and inspiration when we behold the marvelous beauties of nature, like a sunrise over the ocean or a full moon shining on the snow-capped Rocky Mountains, so too our souls can be uplifted when we get to know and contemplate the angelic hosts.

WONDER AND FEAR

The awe-inspiring reality of the angels comes across in scripture whenever the angels decide to make themselves visible to human beings. The mere fact that they are able to do this—to take on a visible form even though by nature they are immaterial—demonstrates some of their power. The first reaction of people when they see an angel

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demonstrates it even further: they either kneel down to worship, or they become almost paralyzed with the shock of a supernatural encounter.

A passage from Daniel Chapter 5 vividly describes the glory and power of the angelic presence. Daniel has been praying and fasting over his concern for the future of Israel, when an angel appears to him on the banks of the Tigris River. Here is Daniel’s description of the encounter:

a*As I looked up, I saw a man dressed in linen with a belt of fine gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face shone like lightning, his eyes were like fiery torches, his arms and feet looked like burnished bronze, and the sound of his voice was like the roar of a multitude. I alone, Daniel, saw the vision; but great fear seized those who were with me; they fled and hid themselves, although they did not see the vision. So I was left alone to see this great vision. No strength remained in me; I turned the color of death and was powerless. When I heard the sound of his voice, I fell face forward unconscious.*

—Daniel 10:5–8

In the Book of Revelation, St. John is given a vision of an angel that overwhelms him to the point that he feels moved to worship the angel as if it were divine. The angel has to convince him not to do that. Here is St. John’s description of that encounter:

a*After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth became illumined by his splendor… Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These words are true; they come from God.” I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Don’t! I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brothers who bear witness to Jesus. Worship God.*

—Revelation 18:1, 19:9–10

The Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer for the Mass of the Archangels captures and expresses this amazing character of the angelic presence:

a*… For the honour we pay the angelic creatures in whom you delight redounds to your own surpassing glory, and by their great dignity and splendour you show how infinitely great you are, to be exalted above all things …*

The awesome magnificence of the angels is but a reflection of God’s infinitely greater magnificence. And so, the first role of the angels in the history of salvation is to be an inspiration for us, to encourage us and move us to praise God for his grandeur and infinite majesty. That kind of prayer does more good to our souls than we realize, and we should give ourselves permission to engage in it more frequently.

CONCLUSION: ANGELS SINGING

It’s especially appropriate that the existence of the angels moves us to praise God, because praising God is one of the primary activities of the angels themselves, according to the Bible. In fact, the two prayers of praise embedded most firmly in the celebration of Mass come to us in the Scriptures through angels.

The Glory, which we pray at the beginning of Mass, is taken from the hymn of praise that a host of angels sang in the presence of the shepherds on Christmas night. And the beginning of the Sanctus—the Holy, Holy, Holy—which we pray at the start of the Eucharistic Prayer, the real heart of the Mass, comes to us from Isaiah’s and St. John’s visions of angels praising God in heaven, recorded both in the Old and the New Testaments.

And during the Mass and other liturgical celebrations, our praise of God is actually joined to the angelic praise; we bring our earthly voices together with their heavenly voices, making the whole universe, visible and invisible, unite in worship. The next time you go to Mass, pay special attention to the many times the priest mentions the angels, and you will see that the Mass truly does build a bridge between heaven and earth.

But the angels are not simply an inspiration for our praise of and confidence in God’s power and goodness. God has also given them some more down-to-earth ministries. And we will look at those in the next meditation. But for now, just take some time to savor the glory God reveals to us through the angels. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

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QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When I think of the angels, what comes to mind? How well does my conception of the angels harmonize with what God has revealed about them?
2. God wants us to know about the angels, and that is why he revealed their existence to us. How would I explain to someone why it’s important to know this revealed truth?
3. Praise is an important and enriching form of prayer. How often do I engage in it? How intentionally do I lift my heart to God in praise and thanksgiving during the celebration of Mass?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

a*Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

—Luke 2:8–14 NABRE

a*Once when he [Zechariah] was serving as priest in his division’s turn before God, according to the practice of the priestly service, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to burn incense. Then, when the whole assembly of the people was praying outside at the hour of the incense offering, the angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right of the altar of incense. Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John… Then Zechariah said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” And the angel said to him in reply, “I am Gabriel, who stand before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time.”*

—Luke 1:8–20 NABRE

a*Then I saw one of the seven spirits near me, radiant as at other times, under a form of light. I constantly saw him beside me when I was riding on the train. I saw an angel standing on every church we passed, but surrounded by a light which was paler than that of the spirit who was accompanying me on the journey, and each of these spirits who were guarding the churches bowed his head to the spirit who was near me. When I entered the convent gate at Warsaw, the spirit disappeared. I thanked God for His goodness, that He gives us angels for companions. Oh, how little people reflect on the fact that they always have beside them such a guest, and at the same time a witness to everything! Remember, sinners, that you likewise have a witness to all your deeds.*

—St. Faustina Kowalska *Diary*, 630

ANGELIC MESSENGERS AND ANGELIC PROTECTORS

INTRODUCTION

The angels reveal unimagined dimensions of God’s glory, as we saw in the first meditation. But they also have work to do on behalf of Christ’s Kingdom. Their work for the Church consists primarily of two jobs.

MESSENGERS OF THE LORD

In the first place, they are God’s messengers. This is actually what the word “angel” means. It comes from the Greek word “angelos,” which means messenger. At times, God speaks directly to his people, and through the incarnation he has not only spoken to us but even come to dwell among us and walk with us. And yet, even in the New Testament, sometimes God still sends angels as his messengers.

The Archangel Gabriel comes to bring the good news of the incarnation itself to Mary. A host of angels announces the birth of Jesus to the shepherds. Angels appear to the women who visit Christ’s tomb on Easter Sunday and give them a message to pass on to the Apostles. The entire Book of Revelation is a series of prophetic messages communicated to St. John largely through the ministry of angels.

We may ask ourselves why God chooses to use intermediaries instead of just speaking directly all the time. We can’t understand fully the answer to that question, but we can understand it partially.

God has given an order and a harmony to his creation. Each of his creatures has certain capacities; each has its own nature. And the beauty of creation flows from each creature living and developing that nature to the full. Human beings and angels by nature both have spiritual powers—intelligence, will, freedom. And so, as God unfolds his plan of salvation, he doesn’t override those natural capacities. Rather, he respects them and works with them to accomplish his will. Just as he entrusts the message of the Gospel to the Church, so that each of us can spread that message to those who haven’t heard or accepted it yet, so he entrusts his angels with certain messages. He has arranged the universe so that we and the angels are partners in the work of building up Christ’s Kingdom. He didn’t have to arrange things like that, but he did, and we can rest assured that he did so for some very good reasons.

MESSENGERS TO THE LORD

In the life of the Church, the angels are not just messengers from God to the human family. They also serve as messengers from us to God. In the offertory prayer for the Mass of September 29th, the feast of the Archangels, this comes across clearly. In that prayer, the priest says:

a*We offer you a sacrifice of praise, O Lord, humbly entreating, that, as these gifts are borne by the ministry of Angels into the presence of your majesty, so you may receive them favorably and make them profitable for our salvation. Through Christ our Lord.*

The angels take our offerings from our earthly altars and bring them up to the heavenly altar—in doing so, they become our messengers to God.

In the First Eucharistic Prayer, this same action is highlighted after the consecration of the bread and the wine. The priest bows over the altar and says:

a*In humble prayer we ask you, almighty God: command that these gifts be borne by the hands of your holy Angel to your altar on high in the sight of your divine majesty, so that all of us, who through this participation at the altar receive the most holy Body and Blood of your Son, may be filled with every grace and heavenly blessing.*

The angels take this messenger job seriously. And throughout the history of the Church, the Lord has permitted some extraordinary manifestations of it. One example comes from the life of St. Gemma Galgani, a virgin and suffering soul who lived in twentieth-century Italy. She used to take advantage of the angelic messaging system. Her spiritual director lived in Rome, and she lived

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in the countryside. This was before the days of modern communication, and so when she had an urgent message for her spiritual director, she would entrust it for delivery to her guardian angel. It became a frequent and effective means of communication.

I know one priest who invokes this ministry of the angels every time he preaches. He prays to his guardian angel to connect with all the guardian angels of everyone who will be listening, so that his message will truly penetrate their hearts.

HEAVENLY PROTECTORS

The second major job that God has given the angels in relation to the Church has to do with that term I just mentioned of “guardian angel.” The angels are not just reflections of God’s glory; they are not just messengers; they are also protectors.

Their role as protectors comes across clearly in the opening and closing prayers for the Mass of the Archangels. In the opening prayer, the priest asks the Lord:

a*… graciously grant that our life on earth may be defended by those who watch over us as they minister perpetually to you in heaven.*

And in the closing prayer, he offers a similar petition:

a*Having been nourished with heavenly Bread, we beseech you humbly, O Lord, that, drawing from it new strength, under the faithful protection of your Angels, we may advance boldly along the way of salvation.*

God has involved the angels in the history of salvation by giving them the job of defending us, watching over us, and protecting us. In this way too, they are meant to be our allies in the hard battle of good vs. evil here on earth, and in our own souls—invisible allies, true enough, but real allies nonetheless.

The second liturgical celebration dedicated to the angels commemorates in a special way this role of protection, since it focuses on giving thanks to God for our guardian angels. Church tradition clearly holds that there is a hierarchy of angels, a division of them into nine choirs or groups mentioned in the Bible and often referred to in liturgical prayers: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominations, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. From these, God assigns to each one of us an individual guardian angel to accompany and help us on our journey of faith.

Jesus refers to this explicitly in the Gospel of Matthew when speaking of children and of spiritual childhood:

a*See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father.*

—Matthew 18:10

The offertory prayer for the Mass of the Guardian Angels takes up this sentiment, invoking their protection. The priest prays:

a*Receive, O Lord, the offerings we bring before you as we venerate your holy Angels, and graciously grant that under their constant protection we may be delivered from present dangers and brought happily to life eternal.*

CONCLUSION: OUR NEED FOR HEAVENLY DEFENDERS

Why do we need the protection of guardian angels? And how do they administer this protection, if we can’t even see them? These are important questions, and they have to do with what some theologians call “spiritual warfare” or “spiritual combat.”

The good angels who live in communion with God and love us as God loves us aren’t the only purely spiritual beings involved in the history of salvation. Many of the angels whom God created as good became bad when, under the leadership of Satan (also known as Lucifer), they rebelled against God. Their rebellion led to the beginning of a spiritual battle that still continues today.

In the conference we will take a closer look at that reality, but for now, let’s take some time to prayerfully reflect on, and thank God for, the multifaceted ministry of the angels, our invisible allies. The following questions and quotation may help your meditation.

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QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How often do I think about my guardian angel? What difference would it make in my life if I thought about and asked the help of my guardian angel more often?
2. Here is a traditional prayer to the guardian angel. What does it tell me about how God wants the angels to help us in our Christian journey?

a*Angel sent by God to guide me, Be my light and walk beside me, Be my guardian and protect me, On the paths of life direct me.*

1. Explain in my own words why God has desired to reveal to us the existence of the angels, our invisible allies.

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

a*Then going out he [Jesus] went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. When he arrived at the place he said to them, “Pray that you may not undergo the test.” After withdrawing about a stone’s throw from them and kneeling, he prayed, saying, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done.” And to strengthen him an angel from heaven appeared to him.*

—Luke 22:39–43 NABRE

a*We were being pounded by the storm so violently that the next day they jettisoned some cargo, and on the third day with their own hands they threw even the ship’s tackle overboard. Neither the sun nor the stars were visible for many days, and no small storm raged. Finally, all hope of our surviving was taken away. When many would no longer eat, Paul stood among them and said, “Men, you should have taken my advice and not have set sail from Crete and you would have avoided this disastrous loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage; not one of you will be lost, only the ship. For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood by me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You are destined to stand before Caesar; and behold, for your sake, God has granted safety to all who are sailing with you.’ Therefore, keep up your courage, men; I trust in God that it will turn out as I have been told. We are destined to run aground on some island.”*

—Acts 27:18–26 NABRE

a*Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him.” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.” And he said to him, “Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”*

—John 1:47–51 NABRE

NOTES

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CONFERENCE

SPIRITUAL COMBAT AND THE DEVIL’S FAVORITE TACTICS

INTRODUCTION

Our fallen human nature weighs us down (this is what the Bible traditionally calls our “flesh”), and the fallen world around us is a constant source of spiritual interference. Both of those negative influences are intensified by activity the Church attributes to the devil and his followers, all of whom were created good angels by God, but became evil through their disobedient rebellion against God.

In this conference, we will look at some of the tactics used by the devil and his minions, and in so doing we will come to understand a little bit better how the angels administer their protection.

THE REALITY OF SPIRITUAL COMBAT

The origin of what many theologians call spiritual warfare is described with symbolic language in the Book of Revelation:

a*Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth… Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. The dragon and its angels fought back, but they did not prevail and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it.*

—Revelation 12:3–4, 7–9

The exile of the devil and his demons to earth symbolizes the failure of their rebellion against God in heaven, but the continuance of that rebellion at work here on earth, as they keep expressing their hatred for God by trying to lead men and women into sin, cutting them off from God’s grace.

The singular role of the Archangel Michael in that battle has led the Church to invoke him in a special way in the context of spiritual combat; he is considered the leader of the heavenly army that fights to protect us against these spiritual attacks. Until the end of history, when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead and put a definitive end to all suffering and evil, this clash of good against evil will be ongoing. It is at the heart of spiritual combat.

SPIRITUAL ARMOR

A famous passage from the New Testament writings of St. Paul alludes to this sometimes forgotten dimension of our Christian lives. He writes:

a*Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground.*

—Ephesians 6:10–13

Biblical scholars have different opinions about the specific interpretation of some of those phrases, but the bottom line remains clear. Just as good angels exist and are interested in helping us come closer to God, so too evil spirits exist and are interested in distancing us from God.

This was why Pope Leo XIII energetically promoted the prayer to St. Michael just before the beginning of the twentieth century, a century in which the spiritual battle took particularly virulent physical shape. St. John Paul II encouraged all of us not to forget about this prayer. He said:

a*May prayer strengthen us for the spiritual battle that the Letter to the Ephesians speaks of … The Book of Revelation refers to this same battle, recalling before our eyes the image of St Michael the Archangel. Pope Leo XIII certainly had this picture in mind when, at the end of the last century, he brought in, throughout the Church, a special prayer to St Michael: “Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil …” I ask everyone not to forget [this prayer] and to recite it to*

*obtain help in the battle against the forces of darkness and against the spirit of this world..[1]*

AVOIDING EXAGGERATIONS

It’s possible to overreact to this reality of spiritual battle. It’s possible to become obsessed with the existence of evil spirits, and to attribute everything that goes wrong to their direct interference. That is a dangerous exaggeration, just as dangerous as the exaggerated denial of the very existence of demons.

The Bible and Church teaching make clear that evil spirits exist and are actively working against us, but they also make clear that God is still in charge, limiting the influence of evil spirits and giving us all the room we need to build our lives and exercise our freedom. The Catechism expresses this well.

First, it affirms the reality of this battle between good and evil, a battle that exists both in society as a whole, and in every human soul:

a*By our first parents’ sin, the devil has acquired a certain domination over man, even though man remains free… This dramatic situation of the whole world [which] is in the power of the evil one makes man’s life a battle: The whole of man’s history has been the story of dour 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 …*

—CCC 407, 409

Then the Catechism goes on to explain the very real limits that God has placed on diabolical activity:

a*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 [Romans 8:28].”*

—CCC 395

THE DEVIL’S UNCOMMON TACTICS

In general, theologians identify four different ways that the evil spirits try to work their mischief. The first three are classified as extraordinary demonic activity, because they are much less common than the fourth.

The most dramatic tactic, and the most rare, is demonic *possession*. Through possession, a demon will gain direct power over a person’s body, and from time to time will manifest that power in violent, frightening ways. Many apparent cases of possession are actually due to merely natural causes for hysterical behavior. But the reality still exists, and Canon Law stipulates particular norms regarding exorcisms in order to deal with cases of possession.

Demonic activity can also interfere in someone’s life without taking possession of the person’s body from within. External, direct interference is usually referred to as *obsession* if it has to do with mental and emotional disruptions—frequent and intense negative thoughts and unexplained bouts of depression, for example. It is usually referred to as *oppression* if it has to do with physical disruptions—inexplicable pains or illnesses, for example. If the physical disruption is associated with a place more than a person, it is usually called a demonic *infestation*.

Possession, obsession, and oppression are real tactics of the devil. But they are not always easy to identify, since many of the symptoms they induce can have merely natural causes. In the recommended reading list at the end of this conference, you will find some resources that can help you learn more about these extraordinary and less common manifestations of demonic activity.

THE DEVIL’S FAVORITE TACTIC

But the most common, the ordinary and daily way that the evil spirits try to interfere with our growth in holiness and happiness, is much simpler and much less dramatic. It’s called temptation.

The evil spirits’ goal is to separate us from God. And no amount of possession or obsession can do that on its own—those extraordinary forms of demonic activity just make life more difficult and increase human suffering. But they can never force us to turn away from God. That can only happen if we freely give in to temptation, if we freely commit sin.

[1] St. John Paul II, *Regina Caeli* Address, April 24, 1994

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The very un-dramatic temptations of every day, the temptation to over-indulge, to gossip and backbite, to wound and cut others down, to minimize or eliminate our times of prayer, to hold grudges and seek revenge, to fudge the truth, to run from our duties and our crosses and give in to laziness, lust, greed and self-absorption… These are the arenas of life where every single day we have a chance to show and grow our love for God and neighbor, or to drain and weaken that love.

HELPS AND HINDRANCES

Because of our fallen, wounded human nature, and because of the fallen world in which we live, we already have built in tendencies towards these sinful and destructive behaviors. The evil spirits act in our lives simply by trying to stimulate thoughts that make these behaviors more attractive. Their action takes place in our imagination and in our minds—they sow thoughts that serve as invitations to or justifications for what our fallen nature is already inclined to do, intensifying the temptation to do those things.

The good angels, on the other hand, will help protect us from those thoughts. We don’t know all the details about how this works, but we know that they can directly obstruct or limit the activity of evil spirits. They can also stimulate thoughts that help expose the lies behind those temptations, reminding us of the truths of our faith, of God’s goodness and his promises, of our calling to live in his friendship, the only place we can find the happiness we yearn for.

In that way, the angels truly are our invisible allies, some of the many allies and helps that God’s grace gives us in the midst of our hidden, everyday battles. But we need to use those helps, and he won’t force us to do so. He won’t let us be tempted beyond our power to resist (Scripture promises that[2]), but neither will he eliminate completely these chances to fight for Christ’s Kingdom and to glorify God by saying in our hearts and with our choices, “Thy will be done, Lord, thy Kingdom come.”

CONCLUSION: KEEPING THE TRUTH IN MIND

It’s important for us to know about this invisible dimension of our Christian lives, because God has revealed it to us. It helps us make sense out of the confusing contradictions in life, like the resistance we often feel when we try to do what’s right even in the simplest circumstances. But we shouldn’t exaggerate it. In the end, our job remains the same. If we continually seek God in prayer, the sacraments, and faithfulness to his will, temptations will gradually lose their hold on us, and we will find ourselves not only defending the borders of Christ’s Kingdom, but actually expanding them.

St. James sums this up powerfully and concisely in his New Testament Letter. He writes:

a*So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*

—James 4:7–8

Take some time now to reflect prayerfully on the personal questionnaire, which are designed to help arm you and strengthen you for successful spiritual combat.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How does the idea of “spiritual combat” or “spiritual warfare” make me feel? Why?
2. What are some ways in which this reality can be over-emphasized in the life of a Christian?
3. What are some ways in which this reality can be under-emphasized in the life of a Christian?
4. Explain in my own words why it is impossible for the devil to force someone to commit a sin.
5. Why can ordinary temptations be considered more spiritually dangerous than extraordinary demonic activity like possession, obsession, and oppression?
6. Why does Hollywood gravitate more towards making movies about demonic possession than making movies about holiness?
7. What ordinary temptations occur most frequently in my life? What am I doing to strengthen myself against them?

[2] *“No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).*

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1. Here is the prayer to St. Michael the Archangel. What does this prayer say to me? How do I react to it, and why?

a*St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the Devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly hosts, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan, and all the evil spirits, who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen*

1. Explain in my own words why God chose to reveal the truth about angels and demons.
2. How often do I think about Christ’s promised victory over all evil and suffering at the end of history? How would it affect my daily life if I thought about this promise more often?

FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

1. *Angels and Demons: What Do We Really Know About Them?* by Peter Kreeft
2. *Angels of God: The Bible, The Church, and the Heavenly Hosts* by Mike Aquilina
3. *Meditations on the Angels* by Fr. John Hardon
4. *An Exorcist Tells His Story* by Fr. Gabriele Amorth
5. *The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist* by Matt Baglio

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NOTES

LESSON 6 Evil.. Oh yes, it’s real!

Painting at the Ovieto Cathedral by Lucas Signorelli

Sermon and deeds of the Antichrist.



Pope Benedict XVI

***GENERAL AUDIENCE***

Paul VI Audience Hall
*Wednesday, 12 September*2012

The Book of Revelation tells us that prayer nourishes this vision of light and of deep hope in each one of us and in our communities: it invites us not to let ourselves be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good, to look at the Crucified and Risen Christ who associates us with his victory. The Church lives in history, she does not withdraw into herself but courageously continues on her journey through difficulty and suffering, forcefully asserting that in the end evil does not overcome good, that darkness does not conceal God’s splendour. This is an important point for us; as Christians we can never be pessimistic; we know well that on our journey through life we often encounter violence, falsehood, hatred and persecution, but this does not discourage us. Prayer teaches us above all to see God’s signs, his presence and his action, indeed, to be lights of goodness ourselves, spreading hope and showing that the victory is God’s.

<http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20120912.html>