

30th August 2015
FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
{Epistle: *Galatians 5:16-24* & Gospel: *St. Matthew 6:24-33*}

No man can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one, and love the other: or he will sustain the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.
– Saint Matthew 6:24.



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In a war, a successful outcome usually depends on two main factors. First of all, the discipline and training of the soldiers, as well as the quality of their equipment. Second of all, a good knowledge of the tactics and terrain of the enemy in order to anticipate his moves. As we know, our spiritual life is also a combat. That is why the Church on earth – the part of the Church made up of those still living who have not yet reached heaven – is often called the Church Militant.

As members of the Church Militant, in order to be successful in the warfare of our life, we need not only to be well-trained spiritual soldiers; we also need to know something about the enemies we face.

We face *three enemies* in our spiritual life: the devil, the world and the flesh (*cf.*, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Explanation of the Lord's Prayer*, “On the Sixth Petition”). Although the devil himself rarely intervenes directly by way of extraordinary phenomena like possession – because, of course, he does not like to show his hand unless he has to – he generally tempts us by means of the flesh and the world. “The world,” here, is any *external* source of temptation, and “the flesh” is any *internal* source of temptation.

The Mass texts today warn us of these internal and external spiritual enemies, and so it would be foolish of us not to take them seriously. Today's Mass gives us this warning by setting up two contrasting pairs. First of all, St. Paul in today's epistle sets up a contrast between *the flesh and the spirit*; then, Our Lord in today's Gospel sets up a contrast between *God and Mammon*.

The flesh referred to in the Epistle to the Galatians refers not just to the human body or even to human nature as a whole, but specifically to our *fallen* human nature. In theological language, the flesh is referred to technically as *concupiscence*. It is not itself a sin, but it is caused by sin and leads to sin (*cf.*

Council of Trent, session V, canon 5). We need to understand this in order to understand the temptations we face and how to deal with them.

We have been *created* in the image of God by reason of our rational nature. But, we have also *fallen* through sin – original sin and personal sin – and lost the divine likeness given to us by God’s grace. But we have also been *redeemed* by the Passion of Jesus Christ, who offers us God’s grace once again.

This is the reason for the distinction in the epistle between the flesh and the spirit. The *flesh* refers to our bad tendencies to pride, lust and greed (*cf.* I Jn 2:16). The *spirit* refers to the life of grace, which God gives us in baptism and increases especially through prayer and the sacraments.

God asks us to love him by responding freely to his invitation to eternal life. It is therefore up to us to decide whether we will follow the flesh or the spirit. Because love implies freedom, God respects our choices – and respecting our spiritual choices means respecting their eternal consequences. Do we often stop to think that everything we do – every deliberate thought, word and deed – has an *eternal* value, either bringing us closer to God or farther away? That is why when St. Paul lists the “works of the flesh” in today’s Epistle – a list including a sample of grave sins against the virtues of purity, temperance, religion and charity – he tells us bluntly, “they that do such things shall not obtain the kingdom of God.”

By right, the whole universe is God’s kingdom. But unlike the rain and the wind, the sun and the stars, the wondrous animals and the flying birds who give glory to God simply by *being* what God made them to be (*cf.* Dn 3:57-87), human beings give glory to God by *freely* knowing and loving him. And so, before the final triumph of God’s glory at the Last Judgment, there is a portion of creation that tries to escape from the kingdom of God by refusing to serve him. That rebellious portion of creation is what Scripture means when it warns of “the world.”

Here, the word refers not to the world itself, which was created good by God (*cf.* Gn 1:31) and which God loved enough to send his only Son in order to save it (*cf.* Jn 3:16), but rather the ensemble of people who live according to the flesh and seek to encourage others by their bad example to do the same. If the kingdom of God, which today’s Gospel encourages us to seek above all things, is the community of those who live according to God’s grace – a kingdom which will reach its perfect state only in heaven – then the world is the community of those who follow another king. We should not be surprised that time after time the Bible designates the devil precisely by calling him “the prince of this world” (*cf.*, for example, Jn 12:31, Jn 14:30, Jn 16:11, II Cor 4:4).

The Gospel today uses the word *Mammon* to designate the world. That is a Hebrew word meaning “riches,” and it may be taken to designate “the world,” since the fallen world seeks to tempt us precisely by means of riches, pleasures and earthly power. The good things of this life – and they *are* good, because they were created by God – are not an end in themselves. Sin exists precisely when we take a means for an end, by turning away from God because we attach ourselves exclusively to creatures and we insist on using them how *we* please and not in the way that God intended. The world, in the sense we have explained, tries to get us to forget this distinction, but Our Lord in today’s Gospel is emphatic: “no man can serve two masters ... you *cannot* serve God and Mammon.”

From the picture we have painted, is clear that the flesh and world stand between us and the kingdom of God. In fact, this picture might almost be enough to overwhelm us. When the Bible warns us about the subtle temptations of the flesh and the alluring temptations of the world, it is not to discourage us into becoming deserters. Anyway, in the spiritual combat there can be no deserters, because neutrality is not an option.

Rather, today’s readings show us that – with the help of God’s grace – we can make a choice: the flesh *or the spirit*, Mammon *or God*. Although we are weak on our own, we can do “all things in God who strengthen us” (Phil 4:13). If we fall in battle by yielding to the flesh or the world, that fortunately does not mean the devil can claim his right to carry us off immediately as a trophy of war. God in his mercy gives us the sacraments, which really are our most valuable arm in the spiritual warfare each of us is called upon to wage. Good soldiers don’t wait until they see the enemy coming in order to train. They know that would be too late. A good soldier is always training, so that he will be ready. Likewise, we should not wait until we are wounded – perhaps mortally – by sin before we think of going to confession. Frequent confession is a sure way for God to strengthen us against the world and the flesh because this sacrament not only heals actual sins also but strengthens us against future sin.

And what better remedy could there be against the inclinations of our *fallen* flesh than the *living* flesh of Jesus Christ, truly present in the holy Eucharist? In the Eucharist, there is no conflict between the flesh and the spirit because in this divine Sacrament, the spirit gives life to the flesh. “If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever; and the bread that I will give, is my flesh, for the life of the world” (Jn 6:52). Frequent, fervent communion is a guaranteed weapon against the devil, the world and the flesh. Is it any wonder that, in the words of St. John Chrysostom, a great Father of the early Church, after communion we “return from [the altar] like lions breathing fire, having become terrible to the devil” (Homily 46 on the Gospel of John)?

When we go to confession and receive communion, the devil is literally terrified. The smallest Christian child on the day of her first holy communion or the most fragile elderly Christian receiving the last sacraments on his deathbed inspires more fear in hell than all the temptations of the world and the flesh ought to inspire in us. And so, have no fear. Or rather: have enough fear to take the flesh and world seriously but enough confidence to use the weapons God has given us to overcome them. If we are faithful in frequently receiving these two sacraments with a good disposition, we shall see the fulfillment of Our Lord's promise: "In the world you shall have distress: but have confidence, I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).



In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.