

28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – October 15, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,000 words

The first reading and gospel this weekend present us with the polar opposites of heaven and hell: heaven is the mountain with a sumptuous feast, where God himself will wipe away every tear; hell is the outer darkness with ceaseless wailing and pain. Christ also warns us: “many are invited, but few are chosen”. All, in fact, are invited to the feast, but if one arrives without a wedding garment – that is, if one does leave this life in the state of grace – then he cannot enter into everlasting joy. Living and dying in God’s grace is the central, daily task of our Christian life.

The saints and great spiritual writers speak of this daily task as a battle, even as combat. And this spiritual combat is complex, inasmuch as there are not only external friends and foes – on the one side, the angels and saints, and on the other, the demons – but also that internal struggle with which we daily must contend. Remember what St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: “I do not understand my own actions”, he says. “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”<sup>1</sup> The battle within is real and it can be a tough nut to crack. It is only the grace of God that can save us and transform us; our own resources are utterly insufficient.

Indeed, the goal for us all is to live the way St. Paul did, who proclaims in the second reading, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me.” When we focus on ourselves we come up short; we get frustrated; we even become discouraged. When we learn to depend entirely upon Christ, though, we see how he is strong in the midst of our weakness; we see how he uses even the difficult things – and the struggle itself – to draw us closer to him and to purify us. “I can do all things in him who strengthens me”: this is one of those “life verses” that it would be good for us to repeat often, particularly in the difficult moments.

We are just two days off of October 13, which was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the last apparition of Our Lady at Fatima to the three holy shepherd children. On the thirteenth of each month from May to October of 1917, Our Lady appeared to them, revealed many truths, and also asked of them several things. It was on July 13 of that year she even gave them a vision of hell, which truly horrified them as they came to understand the depth and permanence of the pain and suffering there. But she also gave them the remedy: prayer and penance. And among these, she especially recommended the Holy Rosary.

At the end of each decade of the rosary we are now accustomed to saying the Fatima prayer: “O my Jesus, forgive us our sins. Save us from the fires of hell. Lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of Thy mercy.” The Blessed Mother taught this prayer to the children at Fatima, and it is really another way of saying, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me”: it is prayer of dependence and humility; it recognizes that we cannot save ourselves; yet it also recognizes that we can help others by our prayers. For getting to heaven is not merely a “me and Jesus” proposition; in heaven, we will see how the charity and prayers of many helped us to get there also.

As if it were not enough for our Blessed Mother herself to recommend the prayer of her rosary, many saints, popes, and spiritual teachers have done so as well. Pope Francis just said the other day, “The Rosary is a synthesis of the mysteries of Christ: we contemplate them with Mary, who allows us to see with her eyes of faith and love.”<sup>2</sup> Mary’s eyes were always fixed on Jesus. She always leads us to him. She keeps nothing for herself but gives everything to her Son. And mothers always have a beautiful way of “repackaging” things, of presenting them just right. That is what Our Lady does with our prayers.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:15.

<sup>2</sup> Post of October 7, 2017 on Twitter @Pontifex.

I am the first to confess that praying the rosary is not always easy. I personally have struggled with it rather mightily at times since I started really practicing my faith at age 21. I say that not to discourage anyone but hopefully to encourage: if you find the rosary difficult, you are not alone! I have often faced a temptation to set it aside altogether. But I keep being led back to what Our Lady has said, to what saints and popes have written, and to what so many others testify about their own experiences: it's almost as if we have an obligation to pray it, so highly, frequently, and authoritatively has it been recommended! And, it is often the case that the more you do pray the Holy Rosary, the easier it becomes.

On the great final judgment fresco by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel there is the depiction of someone being pulled into heaven by a rosary. What a beautiful image! The Holy Rosary teaches us, at the feet of our Blessed Mother, to depend on Christ. She always leads us to him, our Good Shepherd; she helps us to remain at his side through this dark valley,<sup>3</sup> this valley of tears, as we climb the mountain to heaven. I am very pleased to make rosaries and rosary pamphlets available this weekend to anyone who may need one; they are over beneath the statue of Our Lady. If you don't already, please join me in trying to say a Holy Rosary each day. And as we continue through this Marian year, let us not cease to ask for the grace to be devoted sons and daughters of our dear Blessed Mother, whose singular goal is to help us get to heaven.

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 23, today's Repsonsorial Psalm.