

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – July 7, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,050 words

The mission of the 72 in Luke’s gospel has a clear parallel with a passage in the Book of Exodus, where Moses had appointed 72 elders to help lead the 12 tribes of Israel. The group of 72 that our Lord establishes is distinct from the 12 apostles; thus, it gives us insight into his intention to establish his Church not merely as a believing people, but as a community united under and led by a hierarchical authority comprised of the apostles and their successors, and the priests, their collaborators. (And the diaconate emerges clearly in the first days of the primitive Church, as we see in the Acts of the Apostles.) The 72 are thus invested with similar powers as the apostles would have, showing them to be a foreshadowing of the ordained priesthood.

One power that Jesus gave the 72 was that of casting out demons. Indeed, this power was both surprising and, it seems, somewhat thrilling for them. Thus, our Lord cautioned them against pride: “Do not rejoice because spirits are subject to you,” he said, “but rejoice because your names are written in heaven”. Pride has always been understood to be the vice behind all others, lurking behind every sin – for pride always claims, “my way is better”. Thus, pride is understood to have been the source of the downfall of the devil and the other demons, who, ever since, have been at war with the good angels and the sons and daughters of light. This spiritual battle is all too real and affects us all. For some, it even requires, at times, special intervention.

The ministry of exorcism goes back to our Lord himself, who made war on demons all throughout the gospels – also sharing that power with his closest collaborators. Depending on the situation, demons either possess, obsess or haunt, or otherwise afflict their targets. In other words, not all demonic influence is the same; there are different grades. As the ministry of exorcism developed down through the ages, through the Church’s lived experience, she, using the authority Christ gave her, further delimited its scope: such that today, the diocesan bishop – a successor of the apostles – is the primordial exorcist. But he may and often does share that responsibility and power by delegating one or more of his priests to assist him with the task.

Almost all priests receive calls from non-Catholics experiencing some sort of negative spiritual phenomena. (Most people know that the Catholic Church takes these matters very seriously; moreover, they implicitly understand – even if they do not get the whole “Catholic thing” – that we have real power to deal effectively with these realities.) But I have also seen that many think the ministry of exorcism to be a sort of magic remedy: come, say the prayers, and the evil will be gone! Oh, but there is nothing magic about it; exorcism ministry is not a quick-fix. The afflicted must evaluate critically whether they are living in a way that is worthy of the Lord. And that is where many drift away: they want the quick fix without the commitment.

Indeed, the Church understands exorcism to be a “sacramental”. Sacramentals are not on the same level as sacraments; in fact, they help dispose us to receive the sacraments more fruitfully. An analogy in this regard concerns the person who goes to Mass regularly but also wears a blessed medal and prays the rosary daily: he or she will get more out of Holy Communion than one who only goes to Mass but doesn’t wear the medal or pray the rosary – that is, who doesn’t avail him or herself of the Church’s sacramentals. Thus, when we encounter someone who is experiencing spiritual affliction, we evaluate whether they are praying; whether they are going to Church; indeed, whether they are receiving the sacraments well and regularly.

People invite evil into their lives in all sorts of ways – superstitious practices and pornography are some of the most common ways nowadays. These easy temptations have the outcome of asking the devil to entertain us; they have the effect of welcoming him and his influence into our lives, of giving him an “in”. If only we had the eyes to see how readily we roll out the red carpet for evil by some of our worldly choices. I think of certain television series that

have been very popular recently; seemingly everyone – “all the cool people”, so to speak – were watching them, but the shows were anything but godly. Evil often projects a certain glamor; many readily take the bait. But it is necessary for us to be vigilant and serious about this reality.

It is also necessary for us to recognize the order that the Lord established. He authorized only some in his Church to go head-to-head with the powers of darkness. The Church warns us against ever speaking directly to the devil or his demons; to do so, in fact, is provocation. Only those who are given a share in Christ’s power over evil through ordination and proper delegation may do so without possibly making things worse. It is not uncommon today in certain areas to find prayers that speak directly to the devil, but I warn you about such prayers. We may ask the Lord to deliver us from evil – as we do in the Our Father; as we do in the St. Michael Prayer (in which we say, “may God rebuke him, we humbly pray”). We should never speak to evil directly.

No, we must always recall the old saying, “pride goeth before the fall”. We should make the words of St. Paul from the second reading our own: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”. Through our humble dependence upon Jesus – devotedly following him daily in his Church, vigilantly excluding those things that are alien to his way – we may protect ourselves and those whom we love from evil’s power. But whenever we – God forbid – should need greater help, the Lord has provided for that, also, through his bishops and priests. The gospels depict the devil as a “strong man” who plunders and destroys; but our Lord is shown to be “the one stronger”, who shares his power with his ministers for the good of his people.