The Marist Way of Fighting the Battles of the Lord Under the Banner of Mary – Part 1

"It is enough to open a newspaper, and we see that around us there is the presence of evil, the Devil is at work. But I would like to say in a loud voice, 'God is stronger.' Do you believe this, that God is stronger?"

Pope Francis

On the First Sunday of Lent, the Church has us reflect on the temptation of Jesus in the desert.[1] For my purposes, I want to focus on the conflict between the Devil and Jesus, which includes the Church, which extends Jesus's incarnation in time and space. That is what we mean by referring to the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. Consequently, just as the Devil tempted Jesus in his earthly body, so we, his disciples, who make up his Mystical Body, the Church, will be tempted.

Yes, Jesus came to save us from sin. That also included freeing us from the power of the Evil One. When Satan and his fellow angels fell from heaven, he established his dominion over all human beings who also fell because of Original Sin[2] inherited from Adam and Eve. He gained authority over humanity. Jesus came to do battle with Satan and to free us from his captivity.

Liberation from the Devil is a significant theme in the prayers in the Baptismal Rite. During the Reception of the Child, the celebrant prays, "N., the Christian community welcomes you with great joy. *In its name, I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his cross*. I now trace the cross on your forehead and invite your parents (and godparents) to do the same."[3]

Immediately before the Baptism, the celebrant offers a Prayer of Exorcism[4], "*Almighty and ever-living God, you sent your only Son into the world to cast out the power of Satan, spirit of ev*il, *to rescue man from the kingdom of darkness, and bring him into the splendor of your kingdom of light.* We pray for this child: set him (her) free from original sin, make him (her) a temple of your glory, and send your Holy Spirit to dwell with him (her). We ask this through Christ our Lord."

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[1] Mt. 4:1-11, Mk.1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13,

[2] Original sin is the state (not an act) of deprivation of the original holiness that resulted in humanity fearing God, seeing him as a rival, and distrusting God's goodness. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition, #385 – 413. In baptism, the original holiness once enjoyed by Adam and Eve is restored though there remains the inclination to sin and death.

[3] https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/sacramentals-blessings/exorcism.

[4] This prayer is called a Minor exorcism. "Minor exorcisms are prayers used to break the influence of evil and sin in a person's life, whether as a catechumen preparing for Baptism or as one of the Baptized faithful striving to overcome the influence of evil and sin in his or her life." https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/sacramentals-blessings/exorcism.

Nowhere is the Devil's dominion over humanity more apparent than when Satan took Jesus to the top of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world under his dominion. The Devil then offered them to Jesus if he would prostrate and worship him.[5] What is unnerving is the Devil's brazenness in presenting this sad reality as a *fait accompli*.

One cannot help but look at the violence and corruption of current earthly kingdoms and wonder if much has changed. After the 20th century and almost three decades into the 21st century, we are a nation and a world divided and suffering from the scourge of violence, hatred, injustice, and intolerance that impact every facet of society. Few people realize that the 20th century gave rise to the largest number of martyrs than all previous centuries combined.[6]

Not all of this can be attributed to human wickedness. I note that all of this furthers the Devil's agenda to instill hopelessness in the hearts of people, leading them away from God. Pope Francis puts it this way, "It is enough to open a newspaper, and we see that around us there is the presence of evil, the Devil is at work. However, I would like to say in a loud voice, 'God is stronger.' Do you believe this?" Even with that sober analysis of our times, Pope Francis remains known for being a man of hope and good humor.

The founder of the Marists, Jean-Claude Colin, had similar, negative assessment of his times. He said, "The human race appears to me today to be like an old stump, one whose roots have been eaten by a worm. That worm is the unbelief, the indifference which has made the world pagan a second time." Like Pope Francis, he too remained hopeful and in good humor, though he realized the gravity of the situation in which humanity found itself.

"God is stronger. Do you believe this?"[7] That is another way of saying with St. Paul, "Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." (Romans 5:20) That is why we must know where the Enemy is making gains so that we can bring God's grace to bear on where it is most needed.

God's grace aims to combat whatever is opposed to the Gospel and, simultaneously, to love and convert their proponents. To this end, we rely on the power of the cross, which will not result in immediate success (God's patience) and includes our suffering in love for the conversion of others (God's mercy), which human beings can reject but not without consequences. St. Paul puts it this way: "Or do you hold his priceless kindness, forbearance, and patience in low esteem, unaware that the kindness of God would lead you to repentance? However, because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God will

[5] Mt. 4: 8-9
[6] https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/modern-martyrs.
[7] https://aleteia.org/2018/10/27/14-quotes-from-pope-francis-on-the-Devil/.

repay each person according to what they have done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger." (Rom. 2:4-8)[8]

The Church is a resistance movement that waits for Christ to come again in power and glory. That takes the pressure off believers to resort to extreme and violent measures to establish the Reign of God in its fullness, which Christ will do at the end of time. This should protect us from giving into the temptation to take up the sword as a weapon and resorting to vulgarity, rudeness, cruelty, insults, viciousness, callousness, hatred, vindictiveness, violent rhetoric and behavior, demonizing opponents, exploiting the most vulnerable, intentionally replacing truth with lies, purposefully confusing good with evil and evil with good, and accepting an ideology where might makes right, the end justifies the means, and winning at all costs to further religious and political agendas. St. Teresa of Calcutta reminds us that we are called to be faithful, not successful.[9]

Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, an exorcist, says that the footprints of Satan can be seen wherever there is discord, violence and death, disease, decline of faith, rage, victimization, isolation, vice, sin, and conflict.[10] That is what Pope Francis has in mind when he says, "It is enough to open a newspaper, and we see that around us there is the presence of evil, the Devil is at work."

In the following reflection, I will make a few introductory comments on the movie *Nefarious* and address reservations some may have about the topic of the demonic given the predisposition of modernity to accept as reality only what can be seen, touched, measured (materialism) and explained by reason and science.

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[8] The wrath of God is God's passion to set things right. It is the appropriate and necessary response from God to evil. It should not be equated with human anger that is rooted in the perceived slight to our egos. The wrath of God in action looks like those who have suffered injustice and remain resolute, persistent, and stubborn in the pursuit of holding those responsible accountable for their actions. That is what motivated the Jews to pursue the Nazis who had fled at the conclusion of World War II and bring them to Nuremberg to be tried and punished for their crimes against humanity.

[9] A number of movies deal with the theme of the protagonist suffering a horrendous and violent assault on their person, family, or friends but the perpetrators go free because the justice system is broken. The protagonist takes matters into his or her own hands and enacts justice (vengeance) on the culprits. The result is the protagonist becoming like them: cruel and vicious, intent on making the culprits suffer even worse than they have. There is a reason God says, "Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath [God's passion to set things right]; for it is written, "Vengeance *is* Mine, I will repay," says the Lord." (Deut. 32: 35) It is healthy to acknowledge those darker feelings and smart to hand them over to God who will bring the evil doers to justice if not in this life, then, certainly in the next! Playing God in such matters plays into the Devil's plans. That happens when people do not believe when we die, we will be held accountable to God for our lives here on earth.

[10] Msgr. Stephen Rossetti podcast, 16.08, *Spiritual Warfare Today*,