

A PASTORAL LETTER
for the First Sunday of Lent, 22nd February 2015.
To be read at Mass in all the churches and chapels of the Diocese
On our Spiritual Struggle

My dear brothers and sisters,

I am often asked as bishop what the answer is to all the problems we face today. People wonder how we, in such challenging times, can live the vocation of marriage and the family, the call to ordination or the consecrated life, or the apostolic life of a lay person in the world? The answer is always before us, if only we have the eyes of faith to see! Jesus Christ Himself truly present: awaiting us in the Holy Eucharist and in Confession, the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Christ wants to give us every grace we need, if only we turn our hearts and minds to Him. At the beginning of this new Millennium, St John Paul II wrote of the danger of imagining that there existed some magic formula for dealing with the great challenges facing us today. St John Paul insisted:

“we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which He gives us: ‘I am with you’” (Novo Millennio Ineunte n.29).

The Apostle Peter wrote a similar message to the first Christians who were in danger of being overwhelmed by a pagan world. He reminded them of the story of Noah’s Ark by which the world was saved by eight people who relied solely upon God’s promises (I Peter 3:19). They were saved by their faithfulness, and St Peter insists the same will be true for us. The Church only ever has one plan, as St John Paul II reminded us:

“the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition ... It has its centre in Christ Himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in Him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with Him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem” (NMI n.29).

On becoming bishop I was, like all of my predecessors, invited to choose three or four words as a statement of purpose for the years ahead. The words I chose echo Our Lord's warning to his disciples: "*without me you can do nothing*" (Jn.15:5). This motto, "*Nothing without Christ,*" is now printed on every diocesan publication to remind us that while we might be tempted to rely on numbers, on organisation, on amassing resources or even winning popularity, only one thing ever makes us effective - that is when you and I truly depend on Christ! Pope Francis in his first homily described this choice in stark terms:

"We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things but if we do not profess Jesus Christ things go wrong ..." And the Holy Father added: "*When we do not confess Jesus Christ, we confess the worldliness of the devil, a demonic worldliness*" (Homily at the Pro Ecclesia Mass 14th March 2013).

In the Gospel we see that Christ's mission begins by confronting the Devil. We have just heard St Mark tell how

"The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan" (Mk. 1:12).

The Devil is no imaginary figure. He is a living, spiritual being who tries to associate us with his revolt against God (Compendium of the Catechism n.74).

"All of human life" the Second Vatican Council taught "*... shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness ...* (Gaudium et Spes n. 13).

Pope Francis sees this spiritual struggle manifested in fearful, global events but he also sees it in every day events at home, at work and in our parishes. And if anyone thinks they are not engaged in this struggle then Pope Francis has some plain advice: "*either you're a cherub,*" he says "*or you're a little stupid*" (Homily 31st January 2014).

Pope Francis speaks more frequently of Satan than any Pope in recent memory. Shortly before becoming Pope he explained this insistence to an interviewer:

“Maybe the Devil’s greatest achievement in these times has been to make us believe that he does not exist and that all can be fixed at a purely human level” (‘On Heaven and Earth’ p.8).

Pope Francis urgently wants to direct us toward the real struggle of our lives – that same struggle which underlies all the events of human history. It is the struggle with evil and it can never be won by merely human means (cf Eph 6:12). The Second Vatican Council stated this clearly:

“man finds he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil successfully ... but the Lord himself came to free and strengthen man ... casting out the ‘prince of this world’ (John 12:31)” (Gaudium et Spes n.13).

To this spiritual struggle Lent recalls us each year with renewed faith in the victory of Christ and renewed personal conviction: Without Christ we can do nothing! In this wholehearted conviction may you and I be ready to stand at Easter, to profess anew the promises of our Baptism: renouncing Satan and his works, and promising to serve God faithfully in the Holy Catholic Church. This dependence upon Christ is beautifully expressed in words prayed by the priest in the moments before Holy Communion, which I commend to you in the daily living of your own vocation: *“Lord Jesus Christ ... never let me be parted from you”*.

With my blessing as we keep together these days of Lenten renewal,

+ *Mark*

Bishop of Shrewsbury