

Fr. Roger J. Landry
Pittsburgh Catholic Men's Conference
Duquesne University
July 11-12, 2008
14th Saturday in Ordinary Time. Cycle II

Homily

Matt. 10:26 “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops. 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

JESUS AND OUR FEARS

- 1) There's a paradox in today's Gospel. On the one hand, Jesus tells us not to be afraid, because our Father in heaven loves us more than all the sparrows in the world and knows us intimately down to our last strand of hair. Fifteen times in the Gospel, in fact, Jesus tells us not to be afraid, and almost every time he returns to the reason not to fear, because our Father in heaven — like any good father whom we remember on this Father's day! — will provide for us and protect us. In the Sermon on the Mount, he tells us not to worry about what we will eat or drink or wear — things we really need — because that same Father who clothes the lilies of the field knows what we need and will take care of us (Mt 6:28-32). He tells us today that he doesn't even want us to fear suffering and physical death, because not even death can separate us from our Father's love (Rom 8:38-39).
- 2) But at the same time he says that there's one fear we should have: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” This being who seeks to DESTROY us in hell is the devil. Out of love for us, Jesus tells us, very directly, that the devil exists, that he seeks to kill us, and that we should therefore have a healthy fear of him. The great Scottish apologist George MacDonald said, “As long as there are wild beasts around, it is much better to feel fear than to feel secure!” And St. Peter compares the devil to this type of wild beast: “Your adversary, the devil, is prowling the world like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). That someone he longs to consume is you and me.
- 3) I mentioned that Jesus wants us to have a healthy fear of the evil one, which involves two elements:
 - a. First, we need to know how the devil seeks to attack us. The devil has no power over us unless we give him that power. He cannot kill our soul unless we become his accomplices and allow our souls to be killed through mortal (deadly) sin, which separates our souls from the source of life, who is God. The way the “Father of lies” (Jn 8:44) seeks to accomplish this assisted suicide is by getting us to succumb to one of his lies, just as he did with Eve and Adam in the Garden (Gen 3). A healthy fear of the devil involves no paranoia, but a sane vigilance against his lies and against all his temptations to induce us to sin.
 - b. Second, once we know *that* and *how* he's out to get us, we have to know what the remedy is to defeat his attempt to defeat us forever. That remedy is a deep trust in God that expresses itself in

saying yes to God in everything. The evil one got Adam and Eve to sin first by getting them to distrust God and his promises and then to do what God told them not to do; therefore, the antidote to the devil's machinations is to accentuate the opposite of what the devil wants to achieve. In other words, if our best defense is a good offense, we need to trust in God and seek to do his will in all things. We see these principles at work in Jesus' confrontation with the devil at the end of his forty days in the desert. To each of the devil's three assaults, Jesus responded with trust in God his Father, living on His word more than on bread alone, and worshipping and serving Him alone and not presumptuously putting Him to the test (Mt 4:1-11). Jesus tells each of us, in this as in other things, "follow me!" If we trust in the Father enough to say "yes" to him and "no" to the devil, to base our lives on the Truth Incarnate (Jn 14:6) rather than on the "father of lies," then we don't need to fear the devil any more than Jesus did. Jesus is the "stronger man" whom he tells us in St. Luke's Gospel has "attacked and overpowered" the devil, "taken away his armor" and "divided his spoils" (Lk 11:21-22). If we stick fully with the Lord, that stronger man, if we love him with all our mind, heart, soul and strength, then we have nothing to fear — that's why Jesus' statements in the Gospel today are a paradox and not a contradiction. It's only when we are not totally God's that we have to fear, as Jesus tells us, because the devil is constantly at the gate waiting for us to echo his "no" to God so that he might seduce us away from God for all eternity.

- 4) Since each of us has proven vulnerable to the devil's salvos in the past, it's obvious that Jesus was speaking to us in today's Gospel. In creating us free, God left open the possibility that we might choose against him, like Satan and the demons did in heaven, like Adam and Eve did in Eden, like the multitudes did in preferring Barabbas to Christ in Pilate's courtyard, as we have done whenever we've sinned. Our hearts, our souls, our lives, therefore, are a cosmic battleground between good and evil — between loving God and others freely in the truth (Jn 8:32) and adoring false gods of the devil's and our own making. The outcome of that battle depends on our choices. Jesus has already won the cosmic war, but the devil is still trying to amass as many casualties as he can, and he wants us, and our loved ones, and our friends, and those around us on the list of casualties. To combat the evil one's plans for as many victories in particular battles as possible, Jesus has obviously enlisted the angels and archangels, and has stock-piled, in Scripture and sacraments, a powerful arsenal of divine aid. But his special forces for this mission to defeat the devil may surprise you, for they are the very ones the devil is after: IT'S US! Despite our weaknesses, despite the many times we've gone over to the other side, Jesus wants to give us the joy of participating in his own victory over the devil and in helping Him to keep us and all those around us off that casualty list.
- 5) We could spend time in discussing how the devil tries to win individual battles with particular men and women. He tries to find a particular vulnerability — whether it be pride, or greed, or lust, or comfort-seeking, or a desire for control — and tries to manipulate it to get us to distrust God and choose against Him. There are as many examples we could cite as there are people. What I would like to focus on, rather, is the devil's global strategy with all of us, which is directly opposed to God's plans for us. God's plans for us in response to his gift of salvation involves two simple and related elements: DISCIPLESHIP and APOSTOLATE, our personal holiness and fidelity on the one-hand, and our becoming God's instruments to bring others to holiness and fidelity on the other. The devil's strategy involves trying to oppose these two elements, either by getting us not to pay sufficient attention to them, or by trying to frighten us away from acting on them. Let's look at what he does in greater detail with respect to each:
 - a. Personal holiness — The only way for us to share eternally in Jesus' victory is for us to become a saint, because only saints are in heaven. Several times in the Old Testament, God said, "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev 11:44; 19:2; 20:7; 21:8). Jesus told us the same

thing in other words when he said, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48) and “love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34; 15:12). To keep us from heaven, the devil wants to keep us from becoming holy, from becoming a saint. With some of us, he tries to accomplish this by convincing us that we don’t really have to be HOLY; we just have to be GOOD. We don’t have to strive to get an A with the gift of life God has given us; we just have to “do the best we can” and get a D-, because that’s all one needs to graduate to heaven. But we all know what happens when students try to get Ds: many times they fail, and that’s what the devil is counting on.

The second way the devil tries to convince us not to strive for sanctity is by making us fear the consequences of sanctity. He tries to persuade us that if we strive for sanctity we’ll lose our friends, we’ll lose our freedom, we’ll lose even our own personality and identity. Our new Holy Father, Pope Benedict, spoke to this fear in his first homily as pope and told us, just as his predecessor had, not to be afraid and not to give in to the devil’s lies: “Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom? ... No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation.” Our new vicar of Christ concludes with a powerful personal appeal: “And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.” That life, that friendship with Christ, is holiness, and it will be ours, as long as we don’t fear it or take it for granted!

- b. Bringing others to holiness — If we are to love others as Christ has loved us, then this necessarily involves sharing the Gospel with others just as Jesus did with us. In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us, “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” Our salvation, and others’, depends on our doing so. Jesus tells us that much in the Gospel: “Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.” The devil wants to do whatever he can to get us not to acknowledge Jesus before others, so that Jesus will deny us before his Father. He does this, again, in two ways:
 - i. He gets many of us not to take our duty to evangelize seriously by convincing us that it’s not our mission to announce the Gospel, but maybe priests’ and nuns’, or catechists’, or some other group of specialists’. He persuades us to think that all we have to do is be good and to mind our own business, to concern ourselves with our own relationship with God, not with others’. He gets us to believe that to announce the Gospel to others is to “impose” something on others against their freedom and dignity, rather than to “rescue” them from a possible shipwreck.
 - ii. The second means the devil employs is to frighten us away from proclaiming the Gospel. He gets us to fear that we don’t know the faith well enough to pass it on, and will embarrass ourselves, God and the Church if we try. Or he successfully persuades us to think that our friends and family will think us hypocrites if we start to proclaim the

Gospel *now*. Or he tries to intimidate us, by getting us to fear that if we bring the Gospel to the public square, we'll suffer for it; others will call us intolerant, or bigots, or even do to us what they did to Jeremiah and the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the apostles and martyrs. This fear, of course, is justified: if we preach the Gospel, we will suffer for it, as those before us have. That's why Jesus tells us — as he told his first followers — not to fear those who can only kill the body, but not the soul. He wants to fill us with his courage. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the capacity to do the right thing despite our fears. We have no greater example in this than the Lord himself, who himself in the garden prayed that the cup of suffering might be taken away from him, but finished his prayer by entrusting himself once again to His Father, saying, "Not my will, but thine be done" (Lk 22:42). In this, once again as in everything, he says, "Follow me!"

- 6) To defeat the devil, the greatest help we have in the whole world is the Eucharist, in which we receive Jesus Christ, the conquerer of sin and death, the vanquisher of the devil, within us. Jesus in the Eucharist is the greatest source of holiness and the greatest cause of living and spreading the Gospel of love. The devil hates the Eucharist, and tries to do whatever he can to keep us away from the Eucharist. He tries first to keep us away from Mass and Eucharistic adoration, but if he can't, he tries to get us to receive him sacrilegiously; and if he can't get us to receive him in a state of sin, he at least tries to get us to receive him in a routine way, so that we won't allow Jesus to change our lives, as Jesus wants to do from the inside every time we receive him with love. The best way, therefore, to be equipped to withstand the devil's onslaught is to respond to God's help to receive the Lord with ever greater fervor and respond to Him with ever greater zeal and fidelity. Each time we receive Jesus well in the Eucharist, we share in his victory over the devil and are strengthened with courage to carry that victory out to others. As we prepare to receive Him now, on this Father's day weekend, we ask for his help that we, like Him, might trust His Father — our Father in heaven! — in all things, and with Him defeat the wicked "father of lies" once and for all.

BE NOT AFRAID

- 1) Fear not! Be not afraid! So Jesus said to the apostles in the Gospel and so he says to each of us today. The message is as timely now as it ever was. Pope John Paul II, in his first words of the first homily he ever gave as Pope, said "Be not afraid!," and he's been losing his voice repeating that phrase ever since, because he recognizes just how much we need to hear these words, because fear permeates our age. Some people have even said that human life is just a long succession of fears. As babies, we fear darkness and loud noises or when we can no longer see our mother's face. As young children, we fear bullies and doing poorly at school. As teenagers, we begin to fear all types of things — peer pressure, failure, pimples, the impulses within us for the opposite sex, whether we'll be able to find a good job or get into college — all the while thinking that finally when we become adults, the fears will stop. As adults, however, we discover that the fears don't stop, they just change, and even increase. We fear for our kids' safety, we fear for the future, we fear losing our jobs, we fear terrorists, and as we get on in years we begin to fear that most terrible of fears, pain and death.
- 2) Against all of these fears Jesus tells us again today "be not afraid!" And Jesus does not do so naively. Having taken flesh of the Virgin Mary and become fully man, he knows everything human beings experience except sin. He knows what fear is. He knows what pain is and experienced it himself. He knows what death is and entered into it fully. He knows it all. And he tells us not once, not twice, but 16 times in the Gospels, "Do not be afraid!" So, today, he calls us to look at our fears and then to look at Him and at our faith in Him, so that we will allow him to take away our fears and begin to live fully as his disciples.

- 3) In order to allow God to get rid of our fears, we first need to look at where fear comes from. When you come right down to it, fear comes ultimately from a lack of trust, a lack of faith, in God. It doesn't matter what type of fear we're talking about. Whether we're dealing with poverty, pain, helplessness, strained relationships, we cannot see how these things might help us or how God could allow them to happen to us if he were really there and loved us. St. Paul — who suffered tremendously for the faith and from a simply human point of view might have feared all types of thing — once wrote to the Romans about why he was not afraid. He gave us a very clear reason: "Everything works out for the good for those who love God." **EVERYTHING WORKS OUT FOR THE GOOD OF THOSE WHO LOVE AND TRUST IN GOD**, so he saw no reason at all to fear. When he was chased from one village to the other, he trusted in God, because he knew that He was Lord of heaven and earth. When he was scorned and hated by others, beaten up, tortured and left for dead, he trusted in the Lord, who said, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven." When he was imprisoned and had his liberty taken away, he still trusted, because he knew the Lord who had come to set captives free would at the appointed time free him and therefore proudly introduced himself as an "ambassador in chains." When they threatened to kill him, as they did Jeremiah in the first reading, Paul recalled the words of the Lord Jesus from today's Gospel, "Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Paul not only wrote that everything works out for the good for those who loved God, but **LIVED** that truth. Jesus lived that truth. And we're called to do the same.
- 4) But what do we do against our fears? Does Jesus want us just to pretend that they're not there? No. Jesus does not simply tell us not to be afraid, but shows and gives us the way to overcome our fears. We overcome them by *real living faith and trust in God our Father who loves us and will take care of us*. Listen carefully to what Jesus says to each of us during today's Gospel: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." No bird even lands on the ground, Jesus tells us, without the Father's knowing it. If he cares so much for them, how much greater must he care for us. Jesus says he knows exactly how many strands of hair each of us has. Do you know how many strands of hair you have? Experts tell us that a typical red head with a full head of hair has about 90,000 strands, a brown and black haired person about 120,000 and a blond person about 150,000. Yet God knows exactly. That's how intimate is his knowledge and his love of us. We're called to trust in him. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes even further. Listen to him: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ... Strive first for the kingdom of God and his holiness, and all these things will be given to you as well." The solution to our fears is two-fold: (1) to trust in God the Father and in his providence and then (2) strive above all for his kingdom, trusting completely in God. These are two sides of the same coin. If we really trust in God the Father, then we will strive first for his kingdom and holiness, and if we're holy and seeking to live our lives in constant loving relationship with him, then we will have no fear, because we will see like St. Paul that everything works out for the good for those who love God. Notice, too, that if Jesus is saying that we should not worry about the actual things that we really need in life — what we will eat, drink, and wear, without which we'll die — then he's saying that we should all the more not worry about all those other things in life that we worry about that we really don't need, bigger houses, televisions, promotions, prestige, and more and more money.
- 5) But we still have to make what Jesus is teaching us today more concrete. In order to understand how he can say "Be not afraid!," how there can be an all-loving and all-powerful Father in the midst of a world with so much pain and evil, and how St. Paul can write, "Everything works out for the good for those who love God," we have to understand that God (Father Son and Holy Spirit), that St. Paul and all the saints, have a **ONE-TRACK MIND**. There is one "good" for which everything works out for those who love God. One

good. And it's not human wealth or riches. Jesus never promised that everything would work out for the good of our bank account. It's not a life of luxury and pleasure with no suffering or pain. Jesus never promised that we'd have that if we loved him. It's not a life of glamor, acclaim, prestige and fame. Jesus didn't promise us any of those things. It's not even a lot of friends and a calm, peaceful, loving family life. Sometimes our love for God may divide members of our family from us if they don't love God. The good he promises — no matter what else happens to us — the good that the world cannot give and nothing in the world take away — is the good of *an eternal life of love with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*. If our treasure is in the kingdom of God, if our treasure is in our soul and its eternal call to share a life of love with God, then we have nothing to fear, because God can and will make all things work out best for us. That is the good we're talking about. Why fear losing our job? God may make us holier through unemployment or may want us to do something else with the gift of life he's given us. Why fear the violence that others might want to do to us? Even if Osama bin Laden were here in this Church this morning, we'd have nothing to fear, because God may want for our own good to take us to eternal life right now. Or to have us forgive them while we're dying, just as Jesus did and just as St. Stephen did, so that others may be converted, just like St. Paul was converted at Stephen's stoning. Why fear flunking a test, or getting dumped by a girlfriend or boyfriend or any other thing? It might just be that God wants to give us something even greater than what we want, but which he wouldn't be able to do if we passed that test, or married that person, etc.

- 6) In other words, in order for us to be able to put into practice Jesus' command, "Be not afraid!" — and who of us would not beg right now to have all our fears removed, so Jesus' command is as timely now as ever? — we have to have the SAME ONE-TRACK MIND that God does. We have to realize that the only thing that really matters is our salvation, our relationship with God — my salvation and the salvation of others, whom God loves even more than we do. That we have to "seek first, seek above all, the kingdom of heaven." If we make this relationship with God our real treasure, then God promises that everything else that happens to us he'll use to help us to grow closer to him, to eternity, to salvation, and nothing, even death, will be able to take this away. There are two corollaries: The first is that we'll only really fear if we're placing our treasure in other things, things which can be taken away. The second is that we really should have only one fear — hell — and what can lead to it, sin. As Jesus said in the Gospel, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." And if we have this one fear, the fear of hell and what leads to it, sin, then we should have a great love for the gift of the sacrament of confession, where our sins are taken away.
- 7) Today we have a choice to make. A choice to live in fear or a choice to live in faith. There is no third option. At this Mass, God the Father wants to help us choose as his Son has invited us to choose. Not only has the Father nourished us with this Word of God, telling us (and not just suggesting to us) not to be afraid, but now he's going to fulfill one of His Son's greatest promises. Jesus said not to worry about what we are to eat and drink for our heavenly Father would feed us; at this Mass, the Father himself feeds us with the flesh and blood of his Son. As St. Paul said, "If God didn't even spare His own Son, would he not give us everything else besides!" He's about to give us the greatest gift this side of heaven, the foretaste of everlasting life and food for our journey in this life. Everything indeed works out for the good for those who love God. My brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus says to us one more time, "Be not afraid!" And we've got nothing to fear, because we are the disciples of the One who has conquered the world!