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Eph 6:10-20, Ps 144, Lk 13:31-35

## ENTERING INTO CHRIST'S BATTLE, AND WINNING

- Jesus has been challenging our priestly manhood over the course of these days. Yesterday, he told us we needed to agonize to enter into the narrow gate, to strive for his kingdom with greater vigor and perseverance than professional athletes, championship boxers, Navy Seals and Army Rangers do in training camp and in action. Today, we see in all its clarity why he calls us to that standard: because there's a battle going on and he wants us to be able to triumph with him and help lead his people to eternal victory.
- St. Paul tells us today that our struggle isn't fundamentally "with flesh and blood" — meaning other people, for whom we're called to give our lives to help Jesus save — but "with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens." We see in the Gospel how Jesus himself battled against these evil spirits. Jesus was doing exorcisms when people told him to run away from that area "because Herod wants to kill you." Jesus replied, "Go and tell that fox" — an expression that means that Herod was both sly and destructive — "behold I am casting out demons and performing healings today and tomorrow and on the third day I accomplish my purpose." His whole life, but particular his suffering and death is to cast out demons and bring the greatest healing of all because he accomplished his purpose on the third day when he rose from the dead. Herod's opposition didn't derive fundamentally from "flesh and blood," but from his being under the sway of the "principalities, powers and evil spirits" St. Paul describes. And those powers likewise had taken over the Holy City of Jerusalem. Jesus would lament that in the city of the Temple of God, the city whose names (*yarab* and *shalom*) means "foundation of peace," had become a city that warred against God. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus said, "You who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. How many times I yearned to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were unwilling!" Rather than a place that lived by the motto, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!," it was a place that would routinely evict and murder those who came in the Lord's name and would eventually cry out for the crucifixion of the One who enfleshed God's name. This diabolically-inspired rejection didn't happen in the pagan cities of the Decapolis. It didn't happen in the Samaritan cities of Shechem or Mt. Gerizim after centuries of animosity against the Jews and Judaism. It happened in and around the precincts of God's sanctuary. Such facts ought to cure us of any false irenicism and help us all to become aware that there is a battle going on, a battle being waged by principalities, powers, and evil forces against the Lord Jesus, against his prophets, against holiness, against us, and against the people the Lord has entrusted to us.
- This morning in his homily the Domus Sanctae Marthae in the Vatican, Pope Francis focused on the reality of this battle. The Christian life, he said, "requires both strength and courage. It's a continuous battle against the three main enemies of Christian life which are the devil, the world and the passions of the flesh." He lamented that today few live as if they know that a battle is going on, and because of that ignorance don't know who the enemy is, what strategy it will take to defeat him, and what arms are necessary. "In this generation, like so many others, people have been led to believe that the devil is a myth, a figure, an idea, the 'idea' of evil. But the devil exists and we must fight against him. Paul tells us this — it's not just me saying it! The Word of God is telling us this. But we're not all convinced of this." He continued, "The devil is a liar and the father of liars and in order to fight him we must have truth on our side. ... He doesn't throw flowers at us but rather burning arrows." He stressed, "Life is a military endeavor. Christian life is a battle," but added, "We're all a bit lazy, aren't we, in this battle and we allow ourselves to get carried away by our passions, by various temptations. That's because we're sinners, all of us!" But he finished by encouraging us to remember that the battle we're called to wage is a "beautiful battle," because it's a battle meant to be waged with the Lord, that we shouldn't be intimidated "because the Lord is with us." To defend ourselves, he said, we must do what St. Paul tells us, "to put on God's full armor," to let God act as our defense.

- In the Responsorial Psalm today, we blessed God because he is our “rock who trains my hands for battle, my fingers for war,” because he is our “fortress,” “stronghold,” “deliverer,” and “shield.” St. Paul in his exhortation to the Christians in Ephesus, wanted to help them to do exactly what Pope Francis was urging us all to do today, and make that divine blessing practical. He tells us, “Draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power” and “Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the Devil, . . . so that you may be able to resist on that evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground.” As he was writing or dictating this letter under house arrest in Rome, doubtless with plenty of time to ponder the armor of the Roman soldier who was assigned to guard him, he counseled us to be just as arrayed with God as a Roman soldier is with bronze and steel. He mentioned six parts of our battle vesture:
  - “Stand fast with your loins girded in truth.” A belt tied a tunic, held a sword, and allowed freedom of movement. Living in the truth against the father of lies is the most important aspect of all, so that we may move freely, rather than enslaved to lies or to impulses. That fact that the belt enveloped the area of one’s groin is highly significant as well because the area in which so many are most vulnerable to the lies of the devil is with regard to human sexuality. Since we’ve been made in the image and likeness of God who is love, the devil most wants to corrupt our capacity to love, since then he will most easily distort the likeness of God in us. That’s why’s attacked marriage from the beginning with Adam and Eve, seeking to pervert love into lust, and change us from self-givers in the image of the Divine Giver to takers and consumers of others, to degrade us from protectors of others to predators. That’s why we need to stand fast with our loins girded in the truth about God, about us, and about the self-sacrificial love that Jesus exemplified and called to us to imitate.
  - “Clothed with righteousness as a breastplate.” Over our heart and vital peritoneal organs St. Paul says we’re to play righteousness, holiness, being just before God and others. The devil will try to attack our heart and make it hardened. He may accuse us falsely through others of having a merciless or wicked heart because, like Jesus, we won’t bless others doing evil. But the most important defense is integrity of life, of true righteousness. St. Paul wants being right with God to be our true treasure, because where our treasure is our heart will be, and if our treasure is in divine justice, then our heart will be secure.
  - “Your feet shod in readiness for the Gospel of peace.” Sandals were the great sign of freedom in the ancient world. Slaves couldn’t wear sandals because it would make escaping easier. But for Paul this footwear wasn’t just a sign of a “freedom from,” of being able to flee the devil, but of a “freedom for,” showing that we were capable and desirous to evangelize, to go from town to town, from person to person, bringing peace to homes and people to the Prince of Peace. A genuine sign of a Christian is that we’re on pilgrimage, we’re on the move, we’re in the retinue of the One who constantly is calling us to “Come, follow me” and to “Go to the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature.” If laziness or idleness is the devil’s workshop, then one of the most important defenses against the devil is to keep moving, to put our shoes on and get ready for work, for service, for journeying and growth.
  - “Hold faith as a shield, to quench all the flaming arrows of the Evil One.” St. Paul uses in Greek a word for shield here (*thyreas*) that doesn’t refer to the small round shield that we can normally imagine, but a large oblong one full-body shield used by a heavily armed warrior, that one could, in essence, rest behind when the archers of the enemy were bombarding you with arrows dipped in pitch, set ablaze and fired. The full-body protection we need, St. Paul says, is our faith, our complete entrustment to God and to everything God has revealed to us. From the beginning, as we see with Adam and Eve, the devil is trying to tempt us with the fiery dart of distrust of God, that we really won’t die if we disobey him, that no sin is really mortal, and that God really doesn’t want us to live forever, that he doesn’t want us to become like him, but that he fears our becoming like him. As we see in Jesus’ response to the devil in the desert, faith, true trust in God and all he has revealed, is the means to withstand this diabolical bombardment.
  - “Take the helmet of salvation.” The devil is always trying to get us to forget what Christ has done to save us. As we discussed yesterday, he’s trying to get us to think that our salvation is cheap or automatic, and that basically everyone will come to salvation no matter what road they’re on. The great defense against this, St. Paul says, is to envelope our head, so to speak, with the salvation won

for us by Christ, to think about what Christ has done, to think constantly about our salvation and the salvation of others, and to move forward in the path of sanctification that will make that salvation secure. Our mind should be filled with thoughts of salvation, of working out our salvation with holy awe and trembling (Phil 2:12), and that way the devil won't be able to get us to forsake it.

- Take “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” A sword is both a defense as well as a weapon of attack. The Word of God, given to us by the Holy Spirit through the inspired authors, helps us in both. It was Jesus' defense against the devil in the desert and it will be ours, when we know it enough so that the Holy Spirit can remind us of it when we're tempted. It's also our offense against the sins of the world, helping us to build in ourselves and in others the virtues that can strengthen us toward victory in the battle overall.
- The biggest weapon of all in our arsenal, St. Paul says afterward, is prayer, but not just any prayer but prayer that is constant (“pray at every opportunity”), pneumatological (“in the Spirit”), vigilant and enduring (“be watchful with all perseverance and supplication”), unselfish and intercessory (“for all the holy ones and also for me”) and audacious (“with boldness” and the “courage to speak”). This type of prayer is what helps us precisely to gird our loins with truth, to seek the Lord's justice from the heart, to put on our sandals with haste, to guard our faith, to remember and seek salvation and to treasure and en flesh the Word of God.
- For us as priests, those who will be attacked by the principalities and powers perhaps more than any other class of people because if the shepherds are struck the sheep will be scattered, the Church has wisely given us a means by which to prepare ourselves to put on Christ every day and go into battle with him. But one of the most successful stratagems of the devil in recent years is that he has gotten most priests to take this means for granted. The means are the traditional vesting prayers the Church asks us to say as we prepare for Mass, as we get ready to enter into Christ's passion, death and resurrection, his two days of casting out demons and healing in order to accomplish his purpose on the third day. These vesting prayers shouldn't be interpreted at all ideologically, as if they're just for old priests or young priests, or only for those who celebrate the extraordinary form or the ordinary, or those who are traditional or liberal. They're for all priests. Nowadays some of the prayers are for garments that are not obligatory — like the amice or the cincture — but I personally believe that it's worth it to wear an amice and a cincture just to have the occasion to pray these prayers before Mass.
- Back in 2007, Pope Benedict preached on the importance of these vesting prayers at the Chrism Mass in St. Peter's Basilica as a means by which to help the priests of the world withstand the devil's fiery dart of spiritual worldliness and impiety when it comes to how we prepare ourselves inwardly and outwardly for Mass. Especially on a retreat, when we have more time to prepare for Mass, when we don't have to deal with various routine interruptions or conversation in the sacristy, it's a chance for us to revisit the importance of these prayers and to resolve to prepare for Mass with them as we return home.
- Pope Benedict described how in the preparation for Mass, as Christ divests himself to give himself to us under the appearance of bread and wine, we priests, in a *sacrum commercium*, a holy exchange, seek to put on Christ (Gal 3:27). In baptism, of course, we put on Christ for the first time. We were vested in a garment that was not just an external sign but a continual reminder that we've entered into an existential communion with him. He's put on our “clothes,” what Pope Benedict said, “the pain and joy of being a man, hunger, thirst, weariness, our hopes and disappointments, our fear of death, all our apprehensions until death” and he has given us his “garments.” That baptismal reality is deepened at priestly ordination where there is another exchange of clothes, another *sacrum commercium*, another vesting with a garment, to signify on the outside that we no longer live for ourselves but for him who lived and died for us, that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives within us. The Church, Pope Benedict said, has made this reality of “new clothes” visible and comprehensible to us through being clothed in liturgical vestments, so that we, and others, may grasp what's really happening on the inside, that we're putting on Christ the High Priest, giving ourselves to him as he gave himself to us.
- This reality of the holy exchange between Christ and us is meant to be relived and deepened as we prepare for Mass, as we put on Christ and especially put on the armor of God, Christ's own battle array, as we enter into his victory on Calvary and beyond. We need to grasp that the devil and all the principalities, powers and evil spirits with him, will do anything they can to get us to miss Mass, or celebrate it poorly or unworthily, or to distract us during it, so that our people will have an experience that is anything other than a transforming

union with God. So we need to ponder these prayers as battle preparations. “Vesting ourselves,” Pope Benedict said, “must be more than an external event: it means entering ever anew into the ‘yes’ of our office - into that ‘no longer I’ of Baptism that Ordination to the priesthood gives to us in a new way and at the same time asks of us. The fact that we are standing at the altar clad in liturgical vestments must make it clearly visible to those present that we are there ‘in the person of an Other.’ [Liturgical vestments] are a profound symbolic expression of what the priesthood means.” He urged us to pray the prayers given by the Church because, he said, those prayers help us “understand better each single element of the priestly ministry.”

- The first prayer is with the *amice*. We put it over our head and then drop it to cover our neck. The prayer explicitly calls to mind what St. Paul encourages in today’s first reading, “Place upon me, O Lord, the helmet of salvation, that I may overcome the assaults of the devil.” It helps us to put on the mind of Christ as we approach the altar. Pope Benedict commented that the amice is a “symbol of the discipline of the senses and of the thought necessary for a proper celebration of Holy Mass. My thoughts must not wander here and there due to the anxieties and expectations of my daily life; my senses must not be attracted by what there, inside the church, might accidentally captivate the eyes and ears. My heart must open itself docilely to the Word of God and be recollected in the prayer of the Church, so that my thoughts may receive their orientation from the words of the proclamation and of prayer. And the gaze of my heart must be turned toward the Lord who is in our midst: this is what the *ars celebrandi* means: the proper way of celebrating. If I am with the Lord, then, with my listening, speaking and acting, I will also draw people into communion with him.” The prayer said as we put on the amice is a prayer that we may do just that.
- The next prayer is recited as we put on the *alb*. We beseech God as we place it over our shoulders, “Make me white, O Lord, and cleanse my heart; that being made white in the Blood of the Lamb I may deserve an eternal reward.” The alb reminds us of our baptismal garment that we were instructed to keep unstained until Christ comes again, and prepares us to be vested in baptismal graces as we get ready to embrace Christ come again on the altar. It’s a sign that we, and not just our garments, have been made white in the paradoxically greatest detergent of all, the “blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:14) as we through the Mass seek to be numbered among all those dressed in sparkling garments around the Lamb. It’s an outward sign of purity of heart that’s necessary to see God. We know that throughout each day, the devil is trying to sully and stain us with his filth; this prayer allows us to participate in the cleansing Christ did of the apostles at the first Mass, washing their feet — but not their hands and feet — because what needed to be cleansed was their contact with the daily dirt of the world (their baptism had washed the rest of them). Pope Benedict commented that the alb calls to mind “the festive robes that the father gave to the prodigal son who had come home dirty, in rags. When we approach the liturgy to act in the person of Christ, we all realize how distant we are from him; how much dirt there is in our lives. He alone can give us festive robes, can make us worthy to preside at his table, to be at his service.” It is God’s love, shown in the blood of the Lamb, that “makes our dirty clothes white, that makes our clouded spirit true and bright; that transforms us, despite all our shadows, into ‘light in the Lord.’ By putting on the alb we must remind ourselves: he suffered for me, too. And it is only because his love is greater than all my sins that I can represent him and witness to his light. But with the garment of light that the Lord gave us in Baptism and in a new way in priestly Ordination, we can also think of the wedding apparel that he tells us about in the parable of God's banquet. ... In what condition do we want to come to the feast in Heaven, if we are not wearing wedding clothes — that is, love, which alone can make us beautiful?” The prayer as we put on the alb helps us to ask ourselves “whether we are wearing these clothes of love” and leads us to ask the Lord “to keep all hostility away from our hearts, to remove from us every feeling of self-sufficiency and truly to clothe ourselves with the vestment of love, so that we may be luminous persons and not belong to darkness.”
- The third prayer is when we gird ourselves with the cincture. We pray, “Gird me, O Lord, with the cincture of purity, and quench in my heart the fire of concupiscence, that the virtue of continence and chastity may abide in me.” We’re asking him for the grace of self-mastery, for the help to remove from us false loves, false desires — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16) — and the grace to fill us with love for him, so that we may consecrate not only

our sexuality but our entire being to loving him with all we are and to loving others in God's own total self-giving Eucharistic love. To pray for the virtue of chastity means to pray for the grace to love others according to our state of life; for us as priests, that means to love as "friends of the Bridegroom" (a "best man" in English; Jn 3:29) and spiritual fathers. It helps us to recognize that a priest's falls against chastity are never just "sins of the flesh," but sins where the best man tries to appropriate and deflower his best friend's bride or, even more truthfully and disgustingly, commits a sin of spiritual incest, indulging himself sexually with a spiritual child. How pleased the devil and all the principalities, powers and evil spirits with him must be at all of the sexual sins of priests in recent decades. We know how much destruction has come to victims, to their families, to parishes, dioceses, the Church as a whole and the reputation of every priest from the sins of the sexual abuse of minors by wolves in shepherds' clothing, but what's not really talked about as much are the multitude of sins that take place when priests cheat on their vocation with women, or with men, or with prostitutes or pornography, all sins in which a spiritual father commits spiritual incest in his flesh, in his heart, or both. I urge you, brothers, to retain these images. We are by the gift of the priesthood friends of Jesus the Bridegroom and spiritual fathers of all those who will ever be entrusted to us; none of us would ever be attracted to betraying our best friend or toward relations with a family member. The more we think of ourselves as best men and spiritual fathers the more immune we will be to the darts of the devil trying to lead us into sins of unchastity the way he has been able to seduce so many of our brothers. And let's beg each day as we prepare to enter into the most powerful prayer ever — Jesus' own from the Last Supper and the Cross — for God the Father to gird by Christ's own chaste love so that we, with him, can make our whole priestly life a commentary on the words of consecration, rather than our the intentionality of our priestly being perverted to try to take advantage of others rather than serve them!

- The fourth prayer is said as we don the stole, which is the distinctive garment of an ordained minister that is always worn in the celebration of the sacraments and sacramental. We pray as we put it on, "Lord, restore to me the stole of immortality, which I lost through the collusion of our first parents, and, unworthy as I am to approach Thy sacred mysteries, may I yet gain eternal joy." We remember that we're unworthy of the Mass because of our sins and original sin, but that God's will is to wipe away those sins and replace them with his very own presence. We beg for the grace that as we approach God at the altar he may say the word and our souls be healed not just in this world, but forever. We're asking him for triumph over the devil who got our first parents, and us so many times, to collude in sinning, so that we may have an eternal joy, a joy that fills us with hope and joy in this world as we enter into the very event that brought lasting joy to the world.
- The final prayer is over the chasuble. We say, "O Lord, you who said, 'My yoke is sweet and My burden light,' grant that I may so carry this yoke that I may obtain your grace." We call to mind that the Lord has sought through ordination to yoke ourselves to him through the Cross, so that we may experience all our pastoral and personal burdens as a sweet and light source of union with him, as we learn from Jesus who is meek and humble of heart to carry the Cross in the middle of the world. Pope Benedict commented, "Taking the Lord's yoke upon us means first of all: learning from him. It means always being ready to go to his school. From him we must learn gentleness and meekness: the humility of God who shows himself in his being a man. At times we would like to say to Jesus: 'Lord, your yoke is far from light. Indeed, it is tremendously heavy in this world.' But then looking at the One who bore everything — who tried out on himself obedience, weakness, suffering, all the darkness — then these complaints of ours fade. His yoke is that of loving with him. And the more we love him and with him become loving people, the lighter becomes his seemingly burdensome yoke." Pope Benedict says that by reciting this prayer we ask Jesus "to help us become with him people who are loving, thereby to increasingly experience how beautiful it is to take up his yoke," so that we can communicate that experience to all those we serve.
- The Christian life is a battle. The Priestly Life is a battle. Today St. Paul tells us to put on the whole armor of God and that's what we ask God for the grace to do in the Mass we're now celebrating and in the life that is supposed to be united in its entirety to this source and summit of our life of faith. St. Paul would say at the end of his life on earth, writing from the same Roman incarceration, that he had "fought the good fight" and "kept the faith." Let us ask his intercession that we might fight that same

good fight so as to win, by entering into Christ, into his salvation, and his eternal victory, for the one we are about to hold in our hands and receive is our rock who trains our hands for battle, and is our “fortress,” “stronghold,” “deliverer,” and “shield,” to whom be praise and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving, honor, power, and might, forever and ever. Amen. (Rev 7:12).