

# **In the Baptismal Liturgy We Become Marked Men**

## **The Battle of the Soul**

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### **BAPTISM IS A TERRIBLE THING**

It must be that every profession suffers from a certain loss of innocence because of particular knowledge possessed in regards to their purpose or focus. The lawyer can't but help to be cautious in entering any agreement and a construction worker will scrutinize the safety of a building more so than most, etc. and the like. It's similar for the moral theologian during a baptism. While most of the congregation is clapping and awing as the child is presented as the newest member of the Faith (and rightfully so for this is a new life full of grace), I fall deep into prayer shuddering to think what powerful forces will be brought to bear on the newly Christianized. The moment we are baptized, we become marked men; both marked, as Christ's own and marked in the sense of targeted, because we are Christ's own. We now oppose a very powerful enemy, Satan. And between heavenly forces and this enemy the battle for our soul begins. Do we really appreciate the terrible intensity of the struggle that ensues for the soul of the baptized in the liturgy?

### **YOUR ENEMIES WILL BECOME MY ENEMIES**

In the movie 'The Godfather', a man needing help to seek revenge approaches Vito Corleone, the lead character, and the godfather. But the two are not on the same team, so to say. So an alliance is made (by word and ritual coincidentally), where afterwards the godfather assures the man of the benefits of this newfound alliance. Corleone promises, "If by some chance an honest man like yourself made enemies they would become my enemies. And then, they would fear you". So any enemies of the man seeking revenge then become the enemies of this malevolent and powerful godfather; sides have been chosen.

Christ has no enemy more powerful than Satan. It is not a struggle where the victory may be in question and that's the hope of baptism, but it is a struggle nonetheless. It is one wrought with holy fear and trepidation. The newly baptized has made an alliance with Christ; we are brought into the Church and become a soldier of Christ. But sides have been chosen, and by Word and ritual Christ's enemies have become our enemies and the ruin of our soul is now the enemies' goal. To achieve this mission the tactics will be deceptively subtle and often effective.

### **OUR ENEMIES ARE DEMONS**

In a battle, it is necessary to recognize the enemy. Part of the effectiveness of insurgents in modern warfare is to disguise themselves as civilians or members of the same side. When you cannot identify who is on what side, too often the blow is delivered and the damage is done before we even recognize that a battle is under way. There is no surer way to win, or loose as is our case, then to only recognize after the fact that for the entire time you have called the enemy friend and promoted his cause.

Satan is the enemy, and though the victory will certainly be Christ's, it is a mortal error to think there will not be casualties along the way before this war is won. So we must find a way to unmask the enemy and to recognize the disguise. Satan's army consists of demons. And as the prayer to St. Michael warns, they "roam throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls." It may not seem 'intellectual' to speak of demons and the like. It makes the Christian appear medieval, stuck in a period not yet enlightened. But it is not a question of appearing superstitious or naive. We are not materialists accepting only what is visible and quantifiable. If someone rejects our spiritual worldview, it is not a question of intelligence but metaphysics. This confusion is certainly a tactic of the enemy, but I fear the worst of the weapons are even subtler than this. The attentive Christian, whether or not they are able to articulate it well, is usually able to identify and ferret out that error.

## **WHEN THE VIRTUES BREAK, THE CHRISTIAN WILL FALL**

The fall of any particular Christian still comes as a surprise to most, even if it isn't necessarily shocking. We have unfortunately become accustomed to great men falling. The ruin of the best is the worst, is how the maxim goes. But that's not the type of surprise ruin I am speaking about. What brings down the great among us is often evident to all. In fact, the situation is scandalous because the Vice is so easily recognizable. So although it's disappointing, it is attributed to some identifiable spiritual weakness or fragile continency; but there's nothing 'sneaky' about the enemy's tactics in those cases. We are able to see it for what it is and call it what it is...evil appearing as evil.

So what is so terrible that lies before the life of the innocent cherub becoming a soldier of Christ? If in life Satan appeared as some grotesque creature and the evil he tempted us with was apparent, we would easily recognize him and run in the other direction. If all insurgents identified themselves as the enemy, their tactics would be laid bare. And it must be kept in mind that the prize sought is the soul of the newly baptized; Satan wants it back. This becomes a great shell game perpetrated unbeknownst to the guile-free infant as soon as they are touched by the saving waters of Christ and His Word is spoken. What the Christian must steel themselves against, and what should be invoked in daily prayer (Lord, deliver us from evil) is the terrible truth that we need protection not just from vice, but from vice masquerading as virtue; the insurgent appearing as friend and calling evil good is what is so terrible.

## **THE PSYCHOMACHIA**

Prudentius was a Latin poet from the late 4<sup>th</sup> century who authored *Psychomachia*<sup>i</sup>, or “The Fight for Mansoul”. In this poem are battles between personified Virtues and Vices. And as in all war there are weapons, wounds and death. But Christ gives Man the Virtues to overcome the ravages of the ‘Sins’; they must come to his aid. In this poem, the battle ensues as Long Suffering bears the attack of Wrath, with “no danger to blood or life”. With Wrath being held at bay, other Virtues such as Simplicity and Lowliness fall into the pit-trap prepared by the Vice Deceit. They fell in unbeknownst because it was cunningly concealed with branches and turf. It is the nature of Deceit. Then from the west comes the foe Indulgence, “abandoned in voluptuousness she lived only for pleasure.” “She came riding a beauteous chariot. And not with a bowstring or swift arrows did she menace”, but “as if sport she throws violets and fights with rose-leaves”; the Virtues were overcome by her charm. But to their aid comes “the stout-hearted Virtue Soberness” asking of those fooled by Deceit, “What blinding madness is vexing your disordered minds?” They are scolded for choosing silk robes over “the immortal tunic that bountiful Faith wove with deft fingers.” Afterwards, Soberness departs the battleground and leaves the spoils under foot, taking no plunder and thus resisting Vice.

Attracted by the tempting loot comes Greed, with a crooked hand and gaping mouth she “seizes all that the defeated gluttonous Indulgence has left behind.” Other diverse friends “go in attendance on this monster; Hunger, Fear, Pallor and Sleeplessness, to name a few. With the spoils of the battle, “Love of Possession spares not even his own dear ones”, and “Hunger robs his own children” for the spoil. All would have perished had not the Virtue Reason “put her shield in the way of the true comrades of Levi’s race” (priests), for those “shining coins with the yellow image are worthless to the followers of Christ.” Greed, now seeing her power was waning and realizing she could not match them in battle, “puts off her grim look and her fiendish weapons, and changes

to a noble bearing”, becoming the Virtue men call Thrifty, hoping to appeal to the austere nature of the fine priests. Greed’s thinking is that “it matters not whether the prize of victory comes by arms or by guile.” So with “her covering of motherly devotion and white mantel she disguises the rage and fearful fury” underneath. They follow her willingly, and now “the Virtues line is faltering; for they are misled by the monster’s twofold figure and do not know where to see a friend or mark a foe.”

Now to the rescue comes Good Works enriched in faith. She grabs Avarice and “sets upon her with the iron grip of her arms and strangles her, crushing the blood out of her throat until it is dry.” With this battle over, the survivors are told to only take what is necessary for life; simple fare and one garment, relying that “He who gives life will also give food.” The poem continues on, but the point remains clear; the Liar’s greatest weapon against the baptized is the pit-trap of Deceit and Guile.

### **WE NEED MOM – PRUDENCE**

There is a cardinal virtue that straddles the fence between the moral and intellectual; it is Prudence, the mother of all virtues. Whatever act we are engaged in, prudence aids in correctly applying our reason. We saw how Prudentius chose the Virtue Reason to ferret out the deceit of Greed impersonating Thrift; for Prudence alone possesses such a keen ability. Knowing and choosing the right thing to do in any given situation is the task of Prudence and one of the primary acts is to seek counsel. This is the deliberation necessary for a judgment to occur in order for a command to follow. Seeking counsel in others who are prudent themselves is a necessity. Sometimes when we choose what is ‘good,’ it is simply an apparent good, only disguised as a true good. We need both authority and the practical wisdom of other Christian warriors. It is not an easy virtue to master, because as we have seen, the Liar’s ways are subtle.

Examples abound; let's work just one. Parents may over indulge children for the sake of happiness and love. Here, 'happiness' is often mistaken for subjective contentment; "I just want them to be happy" relents the weary parent. And the excess 'love' (they should live better than I did as a child) can really be 'permissiveness' just masquerading as love, which leads to 'narcissism' (everyone loves me just for me being me) all done for the sake of family stability, which is really just a technique to avoid conflict (can't we all just get along?). The Vice Deceit directs both away from Charity (genuine perfection) and Temperance (self-control) to embolden Sloth (the powerlessness of the parents) steeped in Denial (what else is there to do?) and away from family Peace (no one likes confrontation). The Liar is killing two birds with one stone by providing avenues for many vices to grow and giving all a sense of accomplishment.

What if some grotesque demon would have appeared with yellow teeth and distorted flesh? What if he asked the parent to let the child do what they want because they won't listen anyway, and tell the child that although it's shallow to just think you're special and be pouty, it's certainly easier than developing character and earning respect? And then he would say to the entire family that there really is no prevailing virtuous standard worth bearing such interpersonal tension, so avoid discussion and don't frustrate yourselves. Prudence would hardly be needed to do any work, because actions like these would be evidently identified as weak and evil.

Let us say that with the help of Prudence we were not tricked in the above scenario. We have identified these Vices as evil and resisted them; they have been thwarted. We have used the effort of council and deliberation to unmask the ugly demon of Deceit and her sisters; their snares avoided. Should we celebrate our victory and feel safe in our baptismal call and life? Is there yet another way Vice can return to the battlefield for our soul?

## PRIDE'S MY FAVORITE

Al Pacino starred as a lawyer in the movie "The Devil's Advocate" as the incarnate Lucifer (his character's name was John Milton-that's not subtle). A young successful lawyer with a perfect winning record, played by Keanu Reeves (Kevin Lomax), doesn't realize he is the biological son of Milton and thinks his winning streak is solely due to his own skill and craftiness. While defending a child sex offender he knows to be guilty Lomax has pangs of conscience (Prudence's realm). But a reporter named Larry (another incarnation of Lucifer) appeals to his pride by saying, "You had a nice run, it had to close out someday" which prompts Lomax to return to the courtroom, grill the young victim mercilessly and exonerate his client. Here, evil has won the battle. But this is an unethical move by most everyone's moral compass, so the Liar did not really need to use deceit; the Liar here is recognizable, Lomax was just weak.

But, at the end of the movie after Lomax experiences much power, prestige and luxury at the expense of his conscience and family (his wife is now pregnant), Milton reveals himself as Satan; now he knows whom he is dealing with. To not spoil more than necessary, Lomax then regains his virtue and thwarts Milton's attempt to increase power and rule on earth; Lomax is strong. This brings Lomax back in time to the moment of the initial trial where his conscience first convicted him, but he chose poorly; he has now been given a second chance. So this time around, rather than press the innocent young girl on the witness stand unethically, he resigns as counsel leaving the defendant clearly exposed as guilty and putting his own career in certain jeopardy. Here he has done the right thing, leaning on Prudence and with her wisdom correctly applied reason to the action at hand; the vice of Pride has lost and Lomax remains strong.

Then enters Larry again (recall he is the other incarnation of Lucifer) trying to get a story rarely told, one about a lawyer with a 'crisis of conscience'. Lomax humbly turns down the offer,

saying there really is not a story at all and expects to get disbarred. Larry tells him that this story will go national; assuring him it's such big news that once everyone knows about it, being disbarred will be off the table and people will admire him for what he did. Lomax, along with his wife, seemed pleased with that strategy and with his ego gently stroked, agrees to be interviewed. Now Larry is delighted. As the couple goes off scene, Larry morphs into Milton, smiles and says, "Pride, definitely my favorite sin." Deceit has been Pride's soldier. So Lomax, with Deceit climbing in front of Prudence, is coaxed into marketing his reputation as he falls into the pit of Pride covered over to resemble Honor. Another victory has been won without arms or guile.

#### **PRAY FOR ME BROTHERS AND SISTERS TO THE LORD OUR GOD**

These are the cunning traps set for the newly baptized; the children of God. They are subtle, hard to ferret out and carry a grave consequence. Even in overcoming Vice we cannot lower our shields of Reason, for what will Pride look like the next time we see her? Perhaps at the next baptism when water and Word are brought together in liturgy, while most of the congregation is clapping, we should fall deep into prayer shuddering to think what powerful forces will be brought to bear on the newest member of the Christian faith. Because they have become 'marked men' in both ways, there is now underfoot a battle for their soul; a *psychomachia*. We regularly pray in the Confiteor, "I ask the blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God." May it be our weapon to let the Virtues come to our aid and let us ask the Lord, "Send Prudence to your children" so that they may "bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven."

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<sup>i</sup> Prudentius, Aurelius, "Psychomachia", in *Prudentius*, H. J. Thomson, D. Litt., Trans., Vol. I, Harvard University Press, (1962), pp. 274-342.