

Michaelmas

Dearly Beloved,

In the Hebrew language the name *Michael* means *Who is like God?* and calls to mind, on this feast especially, the long Judeo-Christian tradition of the battle in heaven between the “prince of the heavenly host” – Michael – and the devil. This terrible conflict began with Lucifer’s rebellion after the moment of his creation and continues down through time and space, a conflict in which men’s very souls are at stake.

Our eternal destinies are the subject of this cosmic battle between the wicked intent of Satan and the irresistible goodness of Almighty God. Primary in this struggle is the power of Christ allied with that of His Church, aided by the intercession and protection of all the angels and saints of heaven. But **we** are the subjects of this cosmic battle and **we** are called to actively participate in the struggle by virtue of our free wills and the moral choices that an earthly life brings to bear upon all of mankind.

Most Catholics do not realize the primary importance of the liturgy in the formulation of authentic Christian faith and practice. Yet it is Catholic worship – more fundamentally than the teaching instruments of the hierarchy – that forms in us what we believe as Catholic Christians. It is in the liturgy that we first meet Christ, the Word Incarnate, in the pages of Holy Scripture. It is through the experience of her worship that the Church brought into being most of what she *later* codified in theological formulae and Conciliar statements of belief. Long before there were creeds, for example, there was the worship of which the creeds later became expressive.

Most of what we believe regarding the patronage of Michael and his defense of the Church and souls comes neither from Scripture nor official teaching but the Judeo-Christian traditions concerning this warrior archangel and the prayers and actions embedded in the historical rites of the western Catholic liturgy which concern him.

For this reason I wish to draw our attention to one of the primary roles of Michael as expressed in the text of today’s Alleluia verse:

*Sancte Michael, defende nos in proelio: **ut non pereamus in tremendo iudicio** – Saint Michael the Archangel defend us in the battle **so that we may not perish in the day of great judgment.***

When a Christian dies the requiem liturgy prays that God’s standard-bearer, Michael, may lead him into paradise. For this reason, Christian iconography often represents Michael as bearing the scales of divine justice in which souls are weighed on the great day of judgment.

The “end” of our Christian life is the love and service of God, and the battle over which Satan and Michael are engaged happens to be none other than **the moral acts of the human person**. And though the members of the priesthood have an instrumental role to play in promoting Christian revelation and the life of grace even they – and they **especially precisely because they are priests** – are not exempt from the terrible trials and moral consequences that life and its divergent temptations brings upon all men.

Are we not all familiar with the account from Matthew’s gospel in which Our Lord asks us to “consider the lilies of the field”? “They labor not nor do they spin, yet not even Solomon in his splendor was clothed as one of these...Be not solicitous therefore saying

what shall we eat or what shall we wear? ... Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you..."

The ultimate reason for our life is **not** the petty distractions and conflicts that the devil and his henchmen seek to induce into our hearts as central or important. Our seeking the Kingdom of God first, above all, and in all, is **the one thing that must prevail before every other concern** – it is the one thing that must inform our every other action. For this seeking is nothing else than **charity begun**: it is the Kingdom of God already come upon us, a foretaste of the reality of God's own life in the glory of heaven.

In today's Mass we commemorate Michael by reminding ourselves of his role in our salvation. What must this quest **be**, before all else, in seeking the Kingdom of God and His justice? It is a reflection of that cosmic battle waged in our own bodies and souls so explicitly described by Saint Paul in his Letter to the Galatians:

(Read Gal. 5, 16-24. Cf. Epistle appointed to Pent. XIV)

Our appeal to Michael **ut non pereamus in iudicio terribile – that we not perish on the terrible day of judgment** is a cry to him for help so that we might **truly** pass from fleshly behavior to a Christian life which is truly **spiritual** - in its *motivations* and in its *fruits*.

Beloved, I assure you that this battle is **real** and our religion is the armament with which it must be carried out. Paul encourages us with **urgency** to make a **definitive choice**: walk according to the spirit and not according to the flesh, or the one fights against the other in a battle that seeks the extinction of the opposing force. As Christians we must **necessarily** choose the Spirit and its fruits; we must **necessarily** turn from a fleshly conduct with its crop of human destruction.

This conversion, then, is a radical **call to action** in the daily life of the true Christian. Our religion is an **illusion** if we busy ourselves with endless projects, activities and concerns while failing in the central **necessity** of truly seeking God before all else.

Ut non pereamus in iudicio – lest we perish in the day of great judgment we must judge ourselves, not others, as to the effect of our conduct, as to the results of our actions together as Catholics. What then are the fruits of the **spirit**, those effects of grace **lived**, of God's mercies received and made present in us and towards those whom we touch? They will be charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness, longanimity, mildness, faith, modesty, continence and chastity. These fruits, **in their visible, discernible presence**, are the measure of the authenticity of our Christian religious practice and its effect in the world around us. These must mark the priest, **especially**, in his conduct with his brothers and those to whom he ministers.

By way of direct contrast, the works of the flesh, unhappily litanized by Paul, yield fruits of destruction: enmity, contention, wrath, quarrels, dissensions, divisions, envies, murders and things of a similar nature. They are not evidence of true religious practice: **they are evidence of its absence**, no matter how noble the other intentions may have been around which the devil has insinuated these fruits instead. Paul quite clearly says that "they who do such things shall not obtain the kingdom of heaven". In this regard, such fruits among priests are particularly ruinous against an authentic ministration of the Paschal Mystery.

Therefore, Beloved, it is precisely from such negative works that we call upon Michael to defend us, for it is precisely this **struggle against ourselves**, our wicked tendencies, our

abusive treatment of others that **makes up the battle in which we seek his help**. Ours, as Christians, is, instead, the duty of an **unfeigned charity** by which we love one another with the love with which Christ hath first loved us.

Beloved, we find ourselves pulled in various directions for various reasons, involved in all sorts of incessant activities – even illusions about our activities being a service to God. But what is the use of building a house wherein there dwells no real family? What use is a priestly service claimed to the glory of God but wherein the fruits of the flesh – division, contention, envy – are more apparent than not?

On this feast and in this temple built to God's honor and glory, today, we turn to Michael to pray, indeed, **that he save us in the battle so that we may not perish on the great day of judgment**. Let us pray and act in such a way that we may be perceived as seeking first the Kingdom of God and His justice...for it is by its **fruit** that a tree is made known. Christianity without charity, actions bereft of a Christian soul, are delusions – they are works of the evil one, no matter what the magnitude of attendant works.

Let us, therefore, on this feast give ourselves anew and without hesitation to the Divine Master in a service that shows forth an undivided heart. Let us break with pride, sin and works of darkness. Instead, let us sincerely seek God and His Kingdom in everything we think, say and do. Then we will experience the richness and sublime harmony which is the Paschal Mystery **lived**: this, Beloved, is our daily bread, our clothing, our **reward**...this is the Kingdom of God already come upon us in this life here and now.

By true conversion to God and recourse to His Church our hearts will be pacified and our daily concerns will find their true perspective in the light of eternity; charity towards others will be nurtured and we will come to **that peace of God which passeth all understanding**.

Primum quaerite regnum Dei – Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all the rest will be given unto you. If we embrace this conversion and seek what is essential **first** and **in all that we do**, then we will see, with Saint Paul, that we will affect acts, not according to the flesh, but those of the spirit. By a firm and constant decision to follow God **as He truly has commanded**, His grace will bear in us the fruits of charity, joy, peace, patience, modesty and holy purity.

Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in the battle, be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the Heavenly host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the wicked spirits who wander throughout the world seeking the ruin of souls.

Saint Michael, protect us – lest we perish in the terrible day of judgment.

