

August 30, 2020 Go Away Satan Homily: In the early morning of November 15, 2015 two young Moslems, entered a French Catholic church in the Normandy region with one single objective: to kill the priest celebrating the mass. They each had a knife. Upon entering the church, one of them shouted, “You, you Christians, we are going to do away with you”. They approached the visibly frightened priest and demanded that he fall to his knees. The priest complied. The terrorists then slit his throat. Five congregants, three elderly nuns and two laypeople, witnessed the gruesome attack. According to one of the eyewitnesses, the last words of the priest, Father Jacques Hamel, were “Stay away from me, Satan”. Remarkably, the priest quoted verbatim the words of Christ in Matthew’s account of his temptation in the desert (Mt. 4:10) and his sharp words to Peter in today’s gospel: “Away with you, behind me, you Satan”. (Mt. 16:23) Father Hamel’s funeral Mass drew thousands of worshippers. Pope Francis called him a martyr and even the secular press dubbed him a saint.

Today’s gospel reading (Mt. 16: 21-27) marks a decisive turning point in the life of Christ. Announcing his passion and death for the first time, he begins to say openly that he must go up to Jerusalem, suffer greatly and be killed. Peter finds the words of Jesus offensive and unacceptable. He takes on the role of the tempter. He reacts violently and pulls Jesus forcibly to himself by the cloth of his tunic.

Christ is displeased. He gives his friend the name, “Satan”, which means one who opposes or obstructs. By his attitude and words Peter is quite literally blocking Jesus’ way of the cross to Jerusalem. Clearly Peter and his master are not on the same page. Jesus said to Peter, “You are an obstacle to me”. (Mt. 16:23) They are divided.

So often violence and the diabolical go hand in hand. The origin of the word diabolical in Greek (Diabollein) means a violent splitting apart, a rending asunder. Where there is senseless violence, the Evil one is invariably present. Jesus was not spared violence on the road to Calvary. Consider the mob violence, the scourging, crowning with thorns, the buffeting and spitting, and the severing of the ear of the slave, Malchus. On the eve of his death Jesus warned Peter “the devil wants to sift you like wheat”. On Calvary, Christ was nailed to the Cross.

In many of our major American cities Satan appears to have the upper hand. Citizens have been compelled to endure arson, mob violence, looting, toppling and destroying statues, gunfire and abusive language. Evil exists. Violence to the innocent and injustice unleashed on the weak are nothing less than deplorable.

In Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s masterful book on the Father of Russian Communism Vladimir Lenin, “Lenin in Zurich”, there is a strange interplay of violence and evil. Lenin despised people of faith and had a genuine loathing of religious believers. Once in power, he had many of them unjustly murdered. Lenin showed no interest in dialogue, even with those who shared many of his views. He even insisted that working with liberals and social progressives was a waste of time. He simply wanted to overthrow the Russian government. To achieve that end, he advocated violence. In one letter he revealed his thoughts on a crucial matter. “Do you know what revolution means? It means seizing the banks, the railway station, the Post Office and telegraph. Once you’ve done that, the revolution is victorious. And what do you need to do it? Weapons.”

As praying Christians it is very easy for us to overlook the gravity of Christ's words in the Lord's Prayer: deliver us from the Evil One. Minimizing or, worse, ignoring Satan's role in the civil unrest in our country is unwise, even foolish. Hopefully Christians can appreciate why we also pray the Prayer to Saint Michael daily for protection.

Let us praise God that Peter changed his ways and followed Christ, even to death on a cross (he was crucified upside down)... which he suffered in the emperor Nero's circus, the exact place where the Basilica of Saint Peter's stands today.

Amen!