

FAITH MATTERS

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THE RETURN OF THE PRAYER TO ST. MICHAEL

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Modern philosophy is full of all sorts of absurd theories about the illusory nature of existence and the unreliability of everything we know to be true. But the boots on the ground, living, breathing, day to day philosophy of even the most angst-ridden German nihilist or the most wild-eyed French existentialist has to be common sense realism. Even German and French philosophers must eat, sleep and conduct themselves in civil society.

There's great consolation in the reliability of the law of gravity and the fact that it means something specific to me or anyone else when you say dog, cat, house, person, good, true and beautiful. But the last three of those words; good, true and beautiful, and maybe even person, do enjoin some philosophical reflection. They are the basis for making sense of right and wrong, obligation, prohibition

and so on. Philosophy isn't just a waste of time.

Catholicism is deeply philosophical and also deeply mystical and of late the mysticism of the Catholic world view has been confronting me with great force, and confronting the minimalist common sense realism I had more or less taken for granted.

Our parish and a number of Catholic churches I've been to recently have begun saying the St. Michael prayer after Mass. It is a breathtaking departure from the modern psychological deconstruction through which I have made sense of my own mental states and those of others. Pride, envy, sloth, greed, lust, gluttony and wrath are not merely maladjustments, but rather they are the snares of a spiritual being who seeks the ruin of souls. They are our weaknesses within our wounded souls, but they are also



passions from outside of us, which act upon us, against which we must not be passive, or we will be swept away.

The idea that there is a spirit of pride, envy, sloth or any of the other deadly sins which can emanate from people, entertainments or places—or from the devil—is an enchanted, mystical, ancient Catholic view. Since the 1200's the Tridentine Mass invoked St. Michael in the Confiteor as a protection against evil. Ours is a faith shot through with struggles between powers and principalities, angels and demons.

The resurgence in the St. Michael Prayer reclaims much of the domain seized by Freud, Jung, Adler and their redactors in outlining the landscape of the soul. And it rings true. We are not merely struggling to harness internal engines of the soul like the desires for sex, meaning and power. We are not merely hot-house orchids, isolated, hermetically sealed, gazing upon the tempests which rage within our spiritual navels. We are also the objects of a cosmic struggle between the forces of God and the Devil.

Scott Hahn explained the sign of the beast, 666, the mark of the devil referred to in Revelations, as the spiteful declaration of spiritual war by Satan. It was rooted in Satan's offended pride and envy. According to St Thomas Aquinas, angels have perfect knowledge of that which they

know, and at the instant of creation, saw all that would unfold throughout history, including the fall of man and the incarnation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ. According to Hahn, that God would become a lowly man was such an affront to the vastly superior angels that Satan rebelled in disgust, and 6, the day upon which man was created, was repeated as a cuss three times, as a mock of the Trinity and a declaration of rebellion. The fall of the angels was directly linked to their envy of man because God took on lowly humanity in the Person of Jesus Christ. So from the beginning, the principle objective of the fallen angels has been the seduction and ruin of human souls. According to Catholic theology we are hunted by the devil and his minions but also protected by hosts of angels, including angels specifically assigned to the protection of each one of us.

Now there is good reason to have pause. Most sane Catholics stiffen up at some point in the discussion of devils and angels. We live in an age of progress and practical solutions and the idea of an intractable struggle between invisible forces of good and evil seems pre-modern and nutty. And this is so among good Catholics who have closely adhered to the Church. In fact Vatican II officially suppressed the then widespread practice of praying the St. Michael prayer after Mass in the *Instructio Prima*. And the denuding of the churches of



frescoes, statuary and all but the most abstract stained glass windows signaled a strong de-emphasis on the theology of powers and principalities. This has been the moment in the Church in which we have grown up. If one were to propose a spectrum extending from dismissal of the devil as a pre-scientific mythological representation of the psychologically and physically

unexplained all the way over to a constant awareness of external forces both attacking and defending us, most of us would locate far closer to the former.

But in the past few years things have changed both among Church hierarchy and in the pews. In 1994 Pope John Paul II urged Catholics to recite the prayer again. And it has become

increasingly evident to a growing number that abortion, pornography, same-sex “marriage” and no-fault divorce are not just isolated evils but part of a broad, concerted effort. Anthropologists accept it as axiomatic that we are religious by nature, always seeking to make sense of the meaning and purpose of our lives and creation. As these things have become more and more prevalent in our culture, their soul-transforming effects have given them a somewhat symbolic quality. It looks more and more like these evils are sacraments of darkness, rites aggressively promoted in a massive spiritual struggle for souls. Witness revelations of abortionist Kermit Gosnell’s practice of keeping hundreds of tiny feet from the babies he killed in plastic bags in his freezer. More and more, ordinary Catholics think in terms of the ancient Catholic understanding of a cosmic struggle between good and evil, God and the Devil.

At the April convocation of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom Academy in Barry’s Bay, Thomas Cardinal Collins gave the keynote address. He began with Chesterton’s observation that we love *The Iliad* because life is a struggle, we love *The Odyssey* because life is a journey, we love the *Book of Job* because so much of what befalls us is incomprehensible. To this he added a fourth; we love the *Book of Revelations* because we want to know how it all ends. He then said that we do know how it all ends—and these were the truest words he spoke that day.

If all the madness we face were merely phantasms in our tortured souls we could have no confidence in the triumph of God. From all the times we have made earnest resolutions and then fallen again, each of us knows that we can’t trust ourselves and so we know that we could not be certain that we would choose good over evil in the end if it were only up to us. The struggle between good and evil would be too much to bear if it were left up to us. We could have no confidence in how it all ends. But mercifully it is not only up to us.

After the Cardinal had spoken, after the final blessing at the end of the convocation mass at St Hedwig’s church, several hundred voices and the Cardinal recited the prayer to St. Michael. He then said that he had already printed up thousands of copies of the prayer and he planned to promulgate it in the Archdiocese of Toronto as soon as opportunity allowed. As the storm gathers and the division between good and evil becomes more stark, the unfolding of history is providing that opportunity.

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THE CATHOLIC REGISTER AND
THE TORONTO STAR.

A blue-tinted religious painting of St. Michael the Archangel. He is depicted as a young man with large, feathered wings, wearing a white tunic and a dark sash. He stands on a dragon, holding a sword aloft in his right hand. The dragon is shown in a state of agony, with its mouth open in a scream. The background is dark and dramatic, with other figures visible in the shadows.

PRAYER TO ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL

*St. Michael the archangel defend us in 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 evil spirits who prowl the world
seeking the ruin of souls.*

Amen.

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