

Fraternus: Answering the Call to Heroic Catholic Manhood
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Reverend [Monsignor[s] and Fathers,
[Reverend Deacons],
My dear brothers in Christ,

It is good to be with you for this *Fraternus* Conference addressing the theme, “Answering the Call to Heroic Catholic Manhood.” As I travel around the diocese doing parish pastoral visits, I enjoy meeting parishioners and engaging in conversation with them. At one of these parish pastoral visits, a man recently asked me why women don’t have a greater role in the Church. I responded by asking why men don’t have a greater role in the Church! He looked surprised, so I explained that I have noticed in some churches that the only men in the sanctuary as Mass are the priests, the deacon and myself. I have celebrated Masses where all of the altar servers were women, all of the lectors were women, all of the extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion were women, and even where most of the ushers were women. Last weekend I had Mass celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of a parish school. There was a

lovely choir of school children who sang at the Mass; they were all girls! Sometimes I think if women were allowed to be ordained priests, deacons and bishops, there would be no men in the sanctuary! I don't blame women for this as much as I blame men for abdicating their responsibilities in the Church!

There is in our modern day a certain tendency to think of religion as something meant not for men but for women. With such a distorted view of religion, too many men are content to give in to the temptation to sit back and let women do most of the work in the parish. Regrettably, this tendency also carries over into the life of the domestic Church in the family home. Men become aloof from the practice of the faith and then we wonder why our children also grow aloof in the practice of the faith. We should fight against this temptation with great fervor!

When he wrote to the Church at Ephesus, Saint Paul reminded them – as he reminds us, as well – that “we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Because we are all of us engaged in a struggle against the forces of the prince of this world, Holy

Mother Church has long spoken of a three-fold division among the People of God. There is the Church Triumphant, those members of the Body of Christ who, through lives of fidelity to Christ, now behold the vision of God in the glory of heaven. There is the Church Suffering, also called the Church Penitent, those members of the Body of Christ who, because they died in friendship with Christ but not quite free of all sin, are undergoing a final purification in purgatory before being ushered into the glory of heaven. There is also the Church Militant, those members of the Body of Christ who are making their pilgrimage through this life, contending with the principalities and powers of which Saint Paul wrote.

As members of the Church Militant, we must set our sights not on merely joining the ranks of the Church Penitent, but of joining the ranks of the Church Triumphant. To put it more simply, we must strive to become saints and we cannot do so by remaining aloof from the life of the Church. If we are to be victorious over those forces that seek to draw us away from holiness and away from union with Christ, we must engage in this spiritual battle. We cannot do so half-heartedly, but must do so purposefully and with great intentionality.

When he reminded the Ephesians about this spiritual battle in which we are engaged, Saint Paul told them to “take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Ephesians 6:13). The armor of which he speaks consists of five pieces, in addition to one weapon. We will return to these armors and to this weapon shortly, but before doing so we should first consider why we should bear a spiritual armor at all.

Brave and Prudent Soldiers

In his reflections on *The Sadness of Christ*, one of my heavenly patrons, Saint Thomas More, said that Jesus “wished His followers to be brave and prudent soldiers, not senseless and foolish.”¹ Because of our modern tendency to see religion as, if you will, women’s work, these might surprise us. But if we consider the life and witness of this one-time Lord Chancellor of All England, we see a man who exemplified a heroic Catholic manhood to an extraordinary extent, a man who, because of his deep loyalty, was a brave and prudent soldier of Christ. We see this most clearly in his defense of marriage and of family life, for which reason King Henry VIII ordered his execution by decapitation.

Those who knew him would hardly dare to call Saint Thomas a fool. His was one of the keenest intellects of his day and he used it to engage with such noted figures as his good friend Desiderius Erasmus, the famed author of, among other things, the satirical work, *In Praise of Folly*. We might say, however, that there are certain aspects of a foolishness found in Saint Thomas. The first sort of foolishness found in him is that of a good wit and ready humor, which he used to entertain his family and friends. The second sort of foolishness found in him is that of the wisdom of God for, as Saint Paul tells us, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (I Corinthians 1:25). There were, to be sure, some who thought him foolish for his repeated refusal to sign the Oath of Supremacy. Saint Thomas willingly allowed himself to be considered a fool in the sight of this world and in so doing showed the wisdom of God. In this, he showed not only his sensibility, but also his great prudence, “for what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life” (Matthew 16:26)? In his life and in his death, Saint Thomas showed himself to be a brave and prudent soldier of Christ; he showed that religion is the realm not of only of women, but also of men. If he, who had so much to lose, could live in this way, if he could be a faithful and intentional disciple of Jesus, then so can

you and I; we, too, are called to be – and can be – brave and prudent soldiers of Christ, and every soldier needs armor.

The Armor of God

Different soldiers wear different kinds of armor, often unique and suitable to the particular tasks entrusted to him. Archers, for example, wear less cumbersome armor than knights because archers need to move with a greater agility and speed. If this is the case with earthly soldiers, how much more so is it with those called to be brave and prudent soldiers of Christ?

If we think back to the armor of which Saint Paul writes, we recall that he first speaks of “having fastened the belt of truth around your waist, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness” (Ephesians 6:14). Soldiers and knights would gird themselves with a belt around what Saint John Chrysostom called “the central balancing support of our whole body.”² If we think of our contemporary emphasis on core training, we can get an idea of what he meant. We are to clothe ourselves with this piece of spiritual armor, with this belt of truth, because it “secures the strength within us” and keeps us away from falsehood and hypocrisy.³ By securing our core, the belt of truth keeps us honest and loyal, but what of the breastplate of righteousness?

Those who live righteously, who live in proper relationship with God and with neighbor, without deceit or guile, wear the breastplate of righteousness, but why does the Apostle refer to this piece of armor as a breastplate? He does so because “one who has put on a sturdy breastplate is difficult to wound.”⁴ As Saint Jerome explains,

Especially well-protected are those essential parts of the body upon which life depends. So put on the breastplate. Strap it together by iron rings and insert the hooks in their place. One protected by such a breastplate of righteousness will not be like a vulnerable stag that receives the arrow in his liver. He will not lapse into rage or lust. Rather he will be protected, having a clean heart, having God as the fashioner of his breastplate, since he fashions the whole armor for every one of the saints.⁵

With these first two pieces of armor, then, we are able to live in righteousness because our lives and activities are centered on the truth, which is not a thing, but a person: Jesus Christ (cf. John 14:6).

After having fastened on the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness, Saint Paul speaks of “having shod our feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15). Soldiers wear boots to protect their feet and to allow them to travel greater distances more swiftly. We know that the Gospel of Jesus Christ “is to be preached among the nations. Wherever, then, it is preached, it must be heard. But so that all

may hear, one must use one's feet to travel. And so do we travel with haste and urgency" because God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:4).⁶ With our feet properly shod with a desire to evangelize, we must share the message of reconciliation with everyone we meet as true and loyal heralds of Christ Jesus.

With our torso and feet so protected, the Apostle next speaks of "taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the Evil One" (Ephesians 6:16). Our spiritual shield is said to be faith because this virtue "contains all the other virtues and brings them all to fulfillment. Unless we are armed with this shield we will not have the strength to battle courageously and resist all these deadly powers. But with the protection of faith we repel all these blows."⁷

In addition to enabling us to engage effectively in this spiritual combat, the shield of faith also "opens up to you the prizes of war, the eulogies of the victors, the crowns of heroes."⁸ In other words, the shield of faith enables us to become saints because, as Saint Paul says, it quenches the fiery darts of the devil. What are these fiery darts if not "temptations and perverse desires"?⁹ With faith in the power of God's grace, these

temptations and desires of the flesh are extinguished by this shield, which covers us wherever we hold it forth.

Finally, with the shield of faith held out confidently before us, Saint Paul tells us to “take the helmet of salvation” (Ephesians 6:17). We place this helmet upon our heads so “that all our senses, mind, thought, speech, and counsel” may be kept intact and in Christ.¹⁰ By guarding our senses with this helmet, we can keep our thoughts, and therefore our words and actions, centered on the salvation Christ has won for us and live in fidelity to him who is our head (cf. Colossians 1:18).

Being so equipped in these five pieces of the armor of God, we are told to take “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17). We know that the word of God “is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). No one who wishes to be a brave and prudent soldier of Christ but does not read from the Scriptures everyday can know the mind of his Lord. After all, as Saint Jerome wisely says, “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”¹¹

We should not fear this sword, but should take it up with reverence and trust, docile to whatever the Spirit wishes to say to us whenever we read it. If the Spirit stirs our hearts to a greater conversion to the Lord, we should not resist; rather, we should yield and cooperate with the grace that is given us.

We sometimes shy away from the sword of the Spirit because it “spills the noxious blood that animates the matter of our sins, cutting out and excising whatever it finds in our soul that is carnal or earthly and, once it has made us dead to vice, causes us to live for God and flourish in spiritual virtues.”¹² Once we have allowed the sword of truth to pierce our hearts and have, through its use, become brave and prudent soldiers of Christ, then we must go forth brandishing this spiritual weapon before others. But when we do so, we must do so with humility, allowing the Spirit to move those whose hearts he will to conversion. We must remember that Saint Paul wishes us to “lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respected in every way” and to be found “speaking the truth in love (I Timothy 2:2; Ephesians 4:15).

Growing together in the grace of God

In my second pastoral letter, *Ars cresendi in Dei gratia*, which each of you should have received about this time last year, I wrote of my desire “that all the Christian faithful be prepared to proclaim their faith in Jesus Christ to their family and neighbors, their co-workers and friends, especially those who have fallen away from the Church.¹³ What does a brave and prudent soldier do but defend the honor of his lord and protect the weak and defenseless? As men called to be brave and prudent soldiers of the Lord Jesus, you and I are called to defend his honor by correcting misunderstandings of his teachings and by increasing the number of his followers. We are also called to protect the weak and defenseless by coming to their aid in whatever way we can, both individually and collectively.

At the end of this pastoral letter, I proposed a four-step path on which we might embark together to grow in God’s grace and increase the number of sheep in his fold:

To build a vibrant community of saints, we will do four things:

1. Invite people to join us in prayer, especially Sunday Mass (hospitality);
2. Study the Bible and learn more about Jesus and our Catholic faith (formation);
3. Provide the sacraments as signs of hope and paths of grace to heaven (prayer); and
4. Serve those in need by practicing charity and justice (service).¹⁴

I hope and pray you will join me in accepting and embracing these four steps so that through them we might become heroic Catholic men. I would like now to reflect briefly on each of these four steps, using the example of Saint Thomas More as a guide to show us the way forward.

Invite

Living as he did in the midst of the Protestant Reformation, Saint Thomas More actively engaged in the weighty questions of his day, many of which are needlessly debated again in our own day. Can women be ordained priests? Is the Catholic Church the only Church Jesus Christ established on this earth? Why are priests required to be celibate? Though he often found such questions to be foolish, Saint Thomas always sought to engage those who asked these questions in a genuine dialogue and discussion, not to gloat over their error and demonstrate his intelligence, but to lead them to the truth.

He would patiently draw out their questions and their own conclusions, and then show how the conclusions of the reformers were incorrect and inconsistent with the Scriptures and the history and tradition of the Church. He did all of this in his books and letters, and in conversations with his family and friends, co-workers and neighbors.

Saint Thomas was not afraid of controversial topics and questions; rather, he invited others into such controversies in order to come to the truth of the matter. In this way, he sought to bring those who had left the Church back into its fold, to receive God's grace and mercy in the sacraments, and to be restored to the communion of the Body of Christ.

When was the last time you invited someone to have a conversation about some central question of the faith that a friend or a co-worker disputed? When was the last time you invited someone to join you at Sunday Mass or to come with you to church to confess your sins? Making such an invitation certainly takes a good amount of courage, but it also – and more importantly – demonstrates a clear love of God and of neighbor. My own mother is someone who sought baptism because she wanted to be able to go to confession! I challenge you to invite one person each month to join you at Mass or for the confession of sins. But before they accept your

invitation, you may need to answer a question or two they have about the faith, just as Saint Thomas did.

Study

To be able to engage in such discussions and to demonstrate the errors of the reformers and lead straying Catholics back to the Church, Saint Thomas first had to understand and explore their questions and study the teachings and history of the Church. He made the time to do so while living as a devoted husband and father, as a faithful friend to many, and while bearing the heavy burden of serving the King in the highest office of the land. We are often not as busy as Saint Thomas, yet we still make many excuses about why we do not study the faith in greater depth. We recognize the gaps in our knowledge, but what do we do to fill them? More often than not, we wait for someone else to come along and fill them for us, all the while keeping the gaps secret to ourselves so the gaps cannot adequately be filled.

We today have greater access to more resources than Saint Thomas could ever have dreamed of having. We have the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* available on our bookshelves. We have the writings of the Church Fathers and saints available on our smartphones and computers. We have a

veritable trove of information available to us in apologetics magazines and podcasts. But do we avail ourselves of these many resources?

In a letter to Bishop John Faber, Erasmus said of Saint Thomas' home on the banks of the River Thames:

Here he lives happily with his family, consisting of his wife, his son and daughter-in-law, three daughters with their husbands and already eleven grandchildren. It would be difficult to find a man more fond of children than he... You would say that Plato's Academy had come to life again. But I wrong More's home in comparing it to Plato's Academy, for in the latter the chief subjects of discussion were arithmetic, geometry and occasionally ethics, but the former rather deserved the name of a school for the knowledge and practice of the Christian faith.¹⁵

To be sure, this is high and fitting praise of the way a great and heroic man governed his household. Still, I cannot help but wonder if someone were to look in our own homes today, would they able to say something close to this about our own households? What are the chief subjects of discussion in our homes? Faith, or something less important?

You, too, can have such a household where an education in the Christian faith takes top priority. As one simple way to move in this direction, I challenge you to read a part of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* each week. Take it slowly and part by part. Read a section of it first by yourself; think it through and pray over it. Then, gather your families

and begin a discussion about whatever aspect of the faith you have read and reflected upon. It may take a year or two to read all the way through the *Catechism* in this manner, but I promise that you will be grateful you took the time to do so. With its four pillars of the Creed, the Sacraments, prayer, and the moral life, the *Catechism* can guide you and your families into a deeper knowledge and love of God. This was the overriding goal of Saint Thomas for his family and it should be our primary goal, as well.

Pray

Each year on Ash Wednesday, we hear Jesus' instruction on the manner in which we are to pray. "But when you pray," he says, "go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). Though it is not so common today, it was once customary for Catholic households to have something of a family altar set up in their homes where the family could gather to pray. These altars frequently consisted of a table on which was placed a Bible, a candle, flowers, and a crucifix, while images of the saints often surrounded the altar.

Saint Thomas was known to spend every Friday in what he called his New House, his private oratory, despite the great duties he had as Lord

Chancellor and as a husband and father. He spent his Fridays in prayer, reading the Scriptures and other spiritual books, and writing his own spiritual books. Because of the spiritual fruits he reaped from such devotions, he encouraged others to do something similar:

Let them choose for themselves some secret, solitary place in their own house, as far removed from noise and company as reasonably possible, and let them sometimes secretly resort to that place, all alone, imagining that they are actually going out of this world and giving over to God an account of their sinful life.¹⁶

In this way, Saint Thomas sought to keep the instruction of the Lord and to bring the affairs of his life before him.

It sometimes happens when we seek to pray that we do not know how to talk to the Lord or what we should say to him. This is especially so if we are not already in the habit of prayer. Saint Thomas tells us, "...our Savior teaches us to pray, not that we may roll in wealth, not that we may live in a continuous round of pleasures, not that something awful may happen to our enemies, not that we may receive honor in this world, but rather that we may not enter into temptation."¹⁷

In another place, Saint Thomas suggests something of an order for prayer to help guide our thoughts and keep us focused on the present moment. After going alone to our place for prayer, he says:

Then, before a shrine or some touching image of Christ's bitter passion, the beholding of which can remind them of its reality and move them to devout compassion, let them kneel down or fall prostrate as at the feet of almighty God, truly believing him to be there, invisibly present, as he most certainly is. There let them open their heart to God and confess their faults - all the ones they can think of - and ask God for forgiveness. Let them call to mind all the benefits they have received from God, both the general ones (received by many other people as well) and any particular ones (perhaps known only to themselves), and give him humble and heartfelt thanks for all of them.

There let them also say out to God their temptations from the devil, the bad tendencies of their own flesh, and the occasions of sin they find in the world, and in their worldly friends and loved ones... There let them lament and bewail to God their own frailty, negligence, and sloth when it comes to resisting and withstanding temptation; let them confess their inclination and readiness to fall into it. And there let them sorrowfully beg God to help them with his grace. Let them pray that he will in one way or another strengthen them against their weaknesses: either by keeping them from falling, or when they do through their own fault have the misfortune to fall, by reaching out with the helping hand of his merciful grace to lift them up and put them back on their feet in the state of his grace. And let them never doubt but that God hears them and will gladly grant them these favors.¹⁸

When we pray, then, we should first make a confession of our sins and ask God's forgiveness - traditionally, we call this making an examination of conscience. Second, we should thank God for the blessings we have received. Third, we should ask the assistance of God's grace against the

temptations we encounter each day. Fourth, we should make an expression of confidence in God's care for us.

I challenge you, then, to find a place in your home to set up a family altar and to involve your family in doing so. Then, spend at least a few minutes each day in prayer confessing your sins, thanking God for his blessings to you, and asking the aid of his grace in your daily life. Over the course of time, you will find this time in prayer to be essential to your day and you will slowly long to spend more time in prayer because of the consolations you will surely receive. You do not have to spend an entire day each week in prayer as Saint Thomas did, but you should spend at least time in prayer each day.

Serve

At the end of his life, Saint Thomas famously said, "I die the king's good servant, but God's first." Much of his life was devoted to the administration of justice and he did everything in his power to judge justly. He refused bribes and showed no preference for the rich, treating them in the same way he treated the poor. He was concerned not with the advancement of his own position, but in faithfully discharging the duties of

his office. In this way, he served both God and king, while at the same time serving his neighbor.

To judge justly and without preference for persons can be a great challenge for mortal, sinful men, but Saint Thomas knew that God's "assistance is always at hand, if we are willing to work with it, just as the light is present with the sun if we do not willfully choose to shut our eyes and play blind."¹⁹

It often happens that God shows us a particular area for our service through the words of others or by repeatedly calling our attention to a particular situation. If we do not close our eyes to his light or our ears to his voice, we can cooperate with his grace and serve him in our brothers and sisters. I challenge you, then, to ask the Lord to show you how you can serve the poor in your communities. Can you volunteer at a local food pantry? Are there repairs to a home you can make? Is there some assistance you can give to a crisis pregnancy center? Find some way that you can help those less fortunate than you and do so at least once each month, with your family, if possible.

Conclusion

Throughout my words to you this afternoon, I have challenged you to undertake four tasks to help you become heroic Catholic men and brave and prudent soldiers of Jesus. I have challenged you to invite someone to join you at Mass or bring that person to confession at least once each month; to establish a family altar in your home and pray for at least ten minutes each day; to study the *Catechism* with your family at least once each week; and to serve the poor in your community at least once each month.

In all of this, as we strive to become heroic Catholic men, we may be tempted to apathy and grow weak in our desire to grow in faith, hope, and love. When we find our desire for sanctity waning, we should seek the intercession of Saint Thomas who offers these words in such a situation: "Then if we are so overcome by weariness that we no longer have the heart to go on, if we are so soft and lazy that we are about to stop altogether, let us beg God to drag us along even when we struggle not to go."²⁰

May God give us this grace. Amen!

¹ Saint Thomas More, *The Sadness of Christ*, trans. Clarence Miller and ed. Gerard Wegener (New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 2009), 9.

² Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians*, 23.6.14. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Vol. VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*. Mark J. Edwards, ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1999), 199.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Saint Jerome, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 3.6.14. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Vol. VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 199.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Marius Victorinus, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 2.6.15. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Vol. VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 200.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Theodoret, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 6.16. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Vol. VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 200.

⁹ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians*, 24.6.14.17. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Vol. VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 200.

¹⁰ Saint Jerome, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 3.6.17. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Vol. VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 201.

¹¹ Saint Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 28. In *PL* 24.17.

¹² Saint John Cassian, *Conferences*, 20.8.11. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Vol. VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 201.

¹³ Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, *Ars crescendi in Dei gratia*, 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁵ Desiderius Erasmus, Letter to John Faber, Bishop of Vienna, 1532. In James Monti, *The King's Good Servant But God's First: The Life and Writings of St. Thomas More* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 57.

¹⁶ Saint Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, 2.16, ed. Mary Gottschalk (New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 1998), 164.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, *The Sadness of Christ*, trans. Clarence Miller and ed. Gerard Wegener (New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 2009), 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, 2.16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, 4.12. (New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 2006), 457-458.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, *The Sadness of Christ*, 35.