

One of the most well political books of all time was written by Niccolo Machiavelli, and unfortunately it's a playbook that that many tyrants have used to success. The book was "The Prince" written in the 16th century. And one of it's main points is that it is better for a leader to be feared rather than loved.

Indeed fear can be powerful; we see it all the time in how leaders use it to maintain control, or use situations where people are fearful to control them. In the face of such situations, perhaps an individual might think well, who am I, what can I do? But the answer to that, as said by our Lord in the Gospel today, is to "fear no one." Like the Twelve, we are sent - sent out into a world that can often be hostile. Sent out to confront evil, and to help people think about what ultimately matters. Sent out to be a people of hope so that people can come to know God. And when you look at how this is done, what you find is that time and time again through non-violence, through perseverance, and through determination Christians have done incredible things to confront evil. It does not mean evil is gone; far from it; the devil is working hard. But it does mean that when someone says "I can do something" and trusts that God is with them, incredible things can

happen. Just consider for instance what happened in many of our lifetimes with the fall of the Iron Curtain.

For much of my life, John Paul was the pope, and growing up, I'd frequently see him on TV going all around the world, including coming here to the United States and visiting a farm in Iowa, and of course holding big rallies for youth at World Youth Day. And what always struck me with him was how through it all, he was a man of hope, who would inspire this hope to others. He would consistently say "be not afraid." And as he did this, he would spread the message as well of being not afraid to stand up for the truths of our faith; whether he was, through his actions, standing up to the Communists, or standing up for the unborn, or defending the poor and marginalized. Even when the KGB tried to take his life, "be not afraid" was a way of life for him.

But when you look at his life, it would seem he would have much to be afraid of.

As a young man, he saw his country fall to the Nazis who invaded sparking World War II. The Nazis overran Poland and killed many, including some of

his friends, Jewish and Christian, who would disappear as they went through the dark streets of Warsaw to perform in plays. Wojtyla would have to study for the priesthood underground, not too far from Auschwitz. In one incident in 1944, he was in his aunt and uncle's house, and in the basement hiding with them when Gestapo agents were there to take young Polish men who might be of fighting age in, fearing they would lead an uprising. The Gestapo agents though came and left.

He was ordained after the war, on November 1, 1946. But sadly, the Communists, who were little better than the Nazis took over. An inspiration to him though was a brave Archbishop Adam Sapieha, who concealed the seminarians during World War II at great risk to himself (he could have been shot for doing this) but then stood up to the communists, when the new regime wanted to pick who could be ordained and try to control the Catholic Church in Poland. Seeing the bravery of his spiritual father, it helped form the future pope for what would happen years later.

He was chaplain for a time, and then went on to graduate studies and would eventually become Archbishop of Krakow in 1963.

It was here that he would push back against totalitarianism.

The Church of Our Lady Queen of Poland is an example. It was opened and consecrated in 1977 by then Cardinal Wojtyla after a two-decade struggle with communist leaders who had fought to keep the centrally-planned industrial suburb of Krakow free of organized religion. The church gave people “a safe place to meet,” and was opened.

When he was elected Pope, one of his first visits was to his homeland to Warsaw. The “Victory Square” in Warsaw was transformed from a secular into a sacred space, and a fifty-foot cross was constructed and a raised altar put up where the Pope would celebrate Mass. Three million people were in the streets to get a glimpse of the pope. People wondered what would he say?

He told the people that his pilgrimage was to honor Saint Stanislaus, who had died defending the Church in Poland. He said that just as Christ sent the apostles to be witnesses, has not “Poland become now a land of particularly responsible witnesses?” By this, he knew that for over 100 years Poland had almost vanished; carved up by first the Nazis then the

Communists. But through this, the Polish people clung to their Catholic faith as the source of their identity, and they had been resurrected as a nation. So the pope asked them “is this not the right place to proclaim Christ with conviction?”

The pope was telling the people to affirm who they were as Catholics here and now. The applause became thunderous, and people cried out “We want God! We want God in our schools! We want God in the family! We want God in books! We want God! We Want God!” Seeing this and hearing it, the Pope said ““The people are preaching with me,” said the Pope, with a smile. “Christ cannot be kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe,” he continued. “The exclusion of Christ from the history of man is an act against man. Without Christ it is impossible to understand the history of Poland. And the history of each person unfolds in Jesus Christ. In Him it becomes the history of salvation.” As the Pope concluded, he prayed: “I cry from all the depths of this Millennium, I cry on the vigil of Pentecost: Let your Spirit descend, Let your Spirit descend, And renew the face of the earth, The face of this land.” Before he left, he said “The future of Poland will depend on how many people are mature enough to be nonconformist,” and in his 9-day visit, he uplifted people to take pride in their identity, but to

have courage in the face of darkness. It in part contributed to the rise of the Solidarity labor movement in Poland; nationwide strikes formed in part from Catholic Social Teaching led people to peacefully stand up for worker welfare but also religious freedom and the release of political prisoners and prohibition of reprisals for religious beliefs. One Polish theologian said it lit the long fuse of the Peaceful Revolution that would culminate 12 years later with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The pope again stood up to the communists when he wrote a personal letter to Brezhnev who planned to invade Poland in December of 1980. He backed down, but on May 13, 1981, the KGB used Mehmet Ali Agca, a Bulgarian assassin to try to kill John Paul II. The bullet cut through the pope's abdomen and missed his main abdominal vein by five millimeters. The bullet hit his finger, which deflected it to miss his spinal cord. The pope later said one hand aimed the bullet, another guided it.

With this failing, Soviet leaders pressured Polish leaders to crush solidarity. Martial law was planned for 1981; soldiers swooped in to arrest activists imprisoning 5,000 in one night. President Regan called John Paul II to ask how the US could help; it was determined through the written word. So US

Fax Machines, new at the time, were sent and it allowed information to go out. Solidarity went underground. One of its leaders, Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko, the spiritual face of the movement, without fear told people that “defiance of authority was an obligation of the heart, of religion, manhood and nationhood.” He was killed by Polish secret police, but hundreds of thousands turned out for his funeral, repeating “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Solidarity would ultimately not be defeated, because the people were unafraid.

The example of John Paul also influenced others. To the west, in East Germany, a Lutheran pastor named Christian Führer began in 1983 to gather people in the Nikolaikirche (Nicholas Church) in Leipzig every Monday at five o'clock to pray for peaceful change in their country. For the next seven years, people gathered here for Friedensgebete, Prayers for Peace, becoming the spiritual spark plug of the Peaceful Revolution in East Germany. This group grew from a handful of people to 70,000 on October 9, 1989, when they marched on the streets armed only with candles and prayer to face down armed troops under orders to shoot them. Thousands of units of blood had been flown in to treat the expected shooting victims. Parents were warned to pick up their children early from school because

gunfire was expected. Ashen-faced people begged Pastor Führer to cancel the prayer service to avoid civil war. Leipzig was a powder keg ready to ignite with a spark. Forty thousand troops were deployed throughout the city, as well as tanks, water cannons, and attack dogs. But Pastor Führer did not back down. He began the service promptly at five o'clock. The crowd overflowed into the streets, where through speakers, the people heard the Beatitudes—"Blessed are the peacemakers"—followed by the petitions of the people, and prayers for all the countries struggling under communism. Then the people in the church received the benediction.

Something remarkable happened at that moment. Pastor Führer says the Holy Spirit descended on all the people as a tangible presence of peace. In his words: "This was extraordinary, because not many of these people were Christians,..But they behaved as if they had grown up with the Sermon on the Mount." They linked each other's arms, lit small candles to carry, and walked out between the soldiers lining the street, purposefully and peacefully. Although the soldiers' guns were loaded and the tank motors were running, this march proceeded peacefully around the ring of Leipzig for three whole hours. No one so much as threw a stone through a window. No one knocked off the cap of a policeman. Not one person gave



the soldiers any reason to open fire. And at the end of that night, the forces of peace had won. Thousands of people followed their example all over the East Bloc in the next days and weeks. One month later, the people of Leipzig assembled to walk again, this time to commemorate the anniversary of Kristallnacht, the night of violence against the Jews leading up to WWII. That night as the people walked through Leipzig, they prayed asking forgiveness for what the Germans did to the Jews in the Second World War. That night, November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell.

The power of the Holy Spirit is very powerful indeed. But it's up to us to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to go and truly make a difference in this world. So how does one do this?

This week in our readings, we have the theme of fortitude, and what it means to be sent and how we can boldly effect change in our world by being people of hope. And I think 3 things for this are essential: 1) Knowing that God is with us, always; 2) Starting with ourselves; and 3) Thinking about what it means to be a soldier for Christ in our world today.

With respect to the first point, God is with us, we hear this in Jeremiah and in our Gospel. Jeremiah is a young man called by God who is given a difficult mission; he's to tell the people they will suffer and there are consequences from turning from God but things can be better if only they would change. But he carries this out knowing no one will want to hear his message, and many will not want to change or repent. Yet he does not run; he says "the Lord is with me like a might champion; my persecutors will stumble, they will not triumph." In our Gospel, we hear again what John Paul would so often say: do not be afraid. Jesus is with us, as He says everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. Jesus did not promise us no suffering; quite the opposite. But in no matter what we go through; our battles with sin; battles with addiction; battles with loss; battles with fear; battles with being hated by others, God is with us always and we can turn to God through prayer, through the Eucharist, through our brothers and sisters in Christ to help us. We are not alone and never will be when the dark times come. As Bishop Robert Barron put it at our priest's assembly last week, we need to grow closer to God through prayer and a deeper spirituality to "build up the ark" that we enter when the flood waters of life come and life is overwhelming. We don't just want to see God as "break glass in case of emergency" but

need to build up and live out what the people in Warsaw cried out: “We want God” by coming to know Him at a deeper level every day so we can be prepared for when the trying times come.

Secondly though, with God, we confront our fears. One of the things you’ll often see in movies with the hero is the hero finding himself, or confronting his deepest fears first before going on mission. Think of Simba running away to hide afraid that he was responsible for his father’s death or will fail or be hated if he returns home. Well what are you afraid of? In my life, I know I’ve had fears come and go; as a child, fearful of riding a two-wheel bike or swimming into the deeper end lest I sink or topple, even though people were there to help me. Getting older, fear of a big test at school; or fear of being evaluated and making it through seminary. Even as a priest, fear of a big homily or parish situation where something has to change and there’ll be a group of people who won’t like it. And as a human being, I sometimes have fears of what the future will bring; fear of losing people close to me; fear of a future health problem; fear of losing Emmett my dog. For many of us, when we have these fears, I think we are like Simba; we run away. We fill our time with distractions and entertainment. These things are important; I need my alone time walking my dog and being in the

woods with my camera. But photographing birds is fun, but won't take away my problems. This is where time for silence and meditation is important, to be alone with God, and to listen to Him and to take the steps. Maybe deep down, you are fearful of losing respect; of aging; of sins you battle that others don't know about and if they did what would the neighbors think; of family who have fallen away; of being "canceled" for your beliefs if you speak out; or admitting something like drinking or gambling or something else is getting out of control. Again, I'd invite you to be not afraid. Be not afraid to confront these things by opening up. By saying "Lord, help me with this." By seeking out a true confidant, a person who shares your faith who won't feel awkward when you say "not so good" to the question "how are you doing?" So many of us live our lives like the Wizard of Oz; we try to put on a good outward appearance but we need to pull back the curtain who we really are. And God loves that man behind the curtain, so let's not be afraid to be honest with ourselves and God about who we really are and what we are afraid of. When Jesus says "fear the one who has the power to throw the soul and body into Gehenna" he means the devil; namely fear falling away and shutting out God. It's what happens when we give up and don't have the proper fear of the Lord; not a fear of Him condemning us,

but a fear of letting Him down because we want to please Him who we love.

Lastly, we are sent. And this is not easy. But look at what those people in the streets of Warsaw did, or the workers in the shipyards of Poland, or the people on the streets of East Germany. They changed the world. And think of what power we have to do that. Like Jeremiah, and like so many of the saints, we will suffer. But we have such power to change things for the better. Think of a person who sits with someone who is sick and brings them Communion and listens to them. Or the example of a parent who works hard day in and day out for the family. Of a friend who says in love "I'm worried about you." Think of the Catholics of all races who went to the South during the Civil Rights movement to march with people who were unfairly treated through institutional racism laws; or a pro athlete today who says I love all people, but I'm not going to hide away from my beliefs on marriage or gender by wearing a pride jersey that isn't reflective of my faith; or of those who volunteer at homeless shelters, or pray rosaries and hand out information in front of so called family planning centers to help a mom choose life. The easy path is that of least resistance; but this isn't the path

to heaven. What power we have when we go out and live our faith in word and action.

As I shared, in my life sometimes I can have a lot of fear, and my mind can race and I can ruminate about the what ifs. But I know God has put me here for a reason and given me a mission. I do not know how that mission will conclude, but I know that I have a job to do, and that God is with me. So my fellow Christians, let us not be afraid to get to work, for as the Father has sent me, so I send you. As we receive Communion and say "Amen," let us never forget the Lord is indeed with us, and with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, let us change the world.