

**A Day for Men**  
**Resurrection Catholic Church, Jacksonville, FL**  
**February 13, 2016**  
**Most Rev. Felipe J. Estévez, Bishop of St. Augustine**

Dear Brothers – I greet all of you in the Name of Jesus Christ!

It is a deep joy for me to be with you today on the *tenth anniversary* of the Day for Men in our diocese. I am sure that in the past decade, the influence of this conference has encouraged and strengthened the faith of innumerable Catholic men in our local church and, through them, has had a profound impact on many more souls. I thank Robert Roldan and the other organizers and collaborators of this conference for their diligent work and Father Peter [Akin-Otiko], the Administrator of Resurrection Parish, for his hospitality to you and to me!

On the feast of the holy Archangels last year my dear friend, Bishop Thomas Olmsted, the Bishop of Phoenix, issued a pastoral letter to the men of his diocese entitled *Into the Breach*. “Breach” is a term he took from the Book of Isaiah referring to a hole in the wall of a city which makes the population inside the city more vulnerable to enemy attack. Bishop Olmsted notes that the “breach” in the walls has both spiritual and social dimensions. The breach is a symbol of the devastation that has occurred in Church and culture, particularly in the past fifty years. His opening words are forceful and clear:

I begin this letter with a clarion call and clear charge to you, my sons and brothers in Christ: Men, *do not hesitate to engage in the battle that is raging around you*, the battle that is wounding our children and families, the battle that is distorting the dignity of both women and men. This battle is often hidden, but the battle is real. It is primarily spiritual, but it is progressively killing the remaining Christian ethos in our society and culture, and even in our own homes.

Such a strong call to arms is quite welcome in an age of political correctness, and I would like to follow some of the most insightful points of the Bishop’s pastoral letter for this talk and would encourage you to read *Into the Breach* on your own to gain the full impact of that powerful message.

For starters, why does the Bishop address his letter only to men? Isn't *everyone* affected by the devastation of culture and church?

If I understand him correctly, Bishop Olmsted wants to encourage men to assume once again their God-given responsibilities to be protectors of people and of sacred institutions like marriage, family, and the Church. Men have a special role and duty to protect the vulnerable and those under attack. If you think about it, our society holds in high regard the man who defends and sacrifices himself for the sake of those who are being treated unjustly. We see this theme repeated over and over again in literature and movies, to the point where the image of the man who steps into the breach to save the helpless becomes the very definition of the "hero."

This was displayed very clearly in the recent movie called *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi*. You don't need to have seen the movie to understand the story of heroic manhood that it recounted. On the most basic level, the six security contractors who responded to the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Libya in 2012 were trained military men who refused to remain on the sidelines when innocent lives were at stake. When the normal security forces failed, these men disobeyed orders to stand down and "stepped into the breach" to defend against the violence of an aggressive force. They saved the lives of thirty people at the cost of two of their six companions. The movie's advertising contained the phrase: "When everything went wrong, six men had the courage to do what was right." In other words, *courage and truth* go together in the life of any real hero. The story is a modern tale of extreme heroism; a tale of men who sacrificed themselves for the sake of others.

There was, however, another struggle which is shown as the sub-theme of the movie. On a deeper level, the "secret soldiers" were all family men whose love and commitment to their families conflicted dramatically with the amount of time they spent out of the country. Surely every father and husband knows this feeling of inner conflict when he is away from his family, even for legitimate reasons. During the film, the men are shown calling home on their phones and devices to talk to their families, and they often expressed deep anguish at how they were missing the most important moments in their kids' lives while they were off in another country "on mission" for the government. The movie accurately portrays the struggle that these men felt at being caught between two separate demands on their heroism.

At the very end of the movie, the viewer is told the story of the real-life heroes of Benghazi: after the brutal conflict, three of the four survivors left the clandestine service in order to dedicate themselves more fully to their families. The fourth hero stayed in the service, but he did so on a limited basis. If the movie was about men who “had the courage to do what was right” in Benghazi, this was all the more true when the men gave up service of a *government* in order to serve the higher demands of a *Kingdom*.

Whether intended or not, the movie showed the transformation that must take place in the heart of every man in order for him to fulfill his destiny of heroic manhood. True masculinity is not expressed so much in the heroic deeds of a warrior during a crisis – as much as these are needed at times. It is expressed in the way a man serves the needs of others in the ordinary circumstances of life. The transformation from a man’s focus on himself and his capacities to a *focus on others* is the journey of true manhood and indeed the journey of a lifetime. Some arrive at that transformation through the testing of faith and others arrive at it through traumatic events which teach them what values are most important in life. The point is that even though the real-life warriors left the service of their country, they didn’t leave the battlefield. These men only *traded battlefields*. In fact, we can say that they entered a more important and vital field of battle, which is the struggle for souls, the battle for their marriages and families, the fight to be faithful to the most important realities in life. And that is the fight that has an eternal dimension.

That is the battle that Bishop Olmsted so accurately calls us to. As evidence of this ongoing warfare, the Bishop cites several frightening statistics that are relevant to us: 14 million people have left the Catholic Church since the year 2000. (That’s nearly a million a year.) Infant baptisms have declined by 28% and Catholic marriages have fallen by a shocking 41%. St. Paul says that we are not fighting against flesh and blood but against the principalities and powers of darkness (cf. Eph 6:11-17) that seek to undermine the work of God’s Kingdom, and that is very evident in our Church and society today.

That is the spiritual, “hidden battle” that Bishop Olmsted refers to, but there is also plenty of evidence of cultural destruction around us that indicates a *climate of warfare* in which we and our families are immersed. And the problems are intensifying. As we know, all Christian prayer, instruction, and Scripture reading have been prohibited in our public schools since the early 1960s, and now it is increasingly difficult to make any reference to God whatsoever in the public

square. In 1966, Hollywood rejected its own censorship code with the result that several subsequent generations have been exposed to a tidal wave of impure graphic imagery and themes that have truly deprived our culture of its innocence. Abortion, of course, has been legal for over forty years with all the human destruction that this evil entails, and now Planned Parenthood is selling body parts from aborted babies with impunity. Last year, the Supreme Court made so-called “gay marriage” the law of the land in all fifty states. We could supply much more evidence of the ongoing warfare on family and faith in our society, but there is no need to belabor the point. We have all seen the culture of death and the culture of hedonism *up close* during the course of our lives.

What we *do* need, however, is encouragement to stand up and fight for our values and rights. We need messages of hope and joy and positive role models that will strengthen us to live as Catholic Men despite all the spiritual and cultural problems of our society. We need to learn how to stand in the breach and protect the things and people that really matter to us. But in order to do that, we need to know what it means to be Catholic Men, because it is men of true Christian faith that make a difference in any society, as history well attests.

Returning to Bishop Olmsted’s letter, he says that being a Catholic Man is first and foremost a call to imitate “*THE* man” Jesus Christ, whose very human nature and life on earth was a perfect revelation of the Father. Isn’t it interesting that, of all the images that God could have used to reveal Himself, He adopted the image of “Father” as the primary example of His essential nature? Jesus was intimately aware that His mission was to bring us into communion with the Father. He spoke of the Father in such familiar terms that many accused Him of blasphemy, but yet, Jesus was the only one who could show us the Father. He was the only one who had “seen” the Father *face-to-face*, so to speak. In the letter to the Colossians St. Paul writes of Jesus in terms that show how perfectly identified Jesus is with the Father Himself:

He is the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn of all creation.  
For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth,  
the visible and the invisible,  
whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers;  
all things were created through him and for him. (Col 1:15-16)

Indeed, it is in the very acts of Creation and Redemption that Jesus is identified with the Father.

The revelation of the Father's identity began very early in the Bible, in Exodus, Chapter 3, when Moses asked God to reveal His divine Name. We are all familiar with the passage about the Burning Bush in which God called Himself, "I Am," or in some translations, "I Am Who Am." In essence, God gives Himself a fatherly title by using this term. He tells us that He is the source of life, the generator of life, and the sustainer of life, both spiritual and physical. He is, in essence, *Life itself*, and all living beings derive their life from Him. As a testimony to this, from the very first verse of the Book of Exodus (Ex 1:1), God calls the people of Israel His "children" and accompanies them in various ways during their wandering in the desert.

Many are surprised to discover that Jesus too calls Himself "I Am" in numerous places in the New Testament, but this is deliberate on His part. In order to identify Himself as fully as possible with the God of Israel, Jesus referred to Himself as "I Am" at the very moment when He was being interrogated by the High Priest in Mark's Gospel (14:62), and there are many other ways in which He shows His union with the Father. It was in the Gospel of John, however, that He fully manifested Himself as the one perfectly united to the Father and the one who would reveal the Father to the world.

There are seven "I Am" titles in this beautiful Gospel, which are worth repeating. We have all heard these titles many times in the liturgy although we may not have known that they are all found in one Gospel: I am the bread of life (John 6: 35, 48); I am the light of the world (8: 12, 9:5); I am the gate of the sheep (10:9); I am the good shepherd (10:11); I am the resurrection and the life (11:25); I am the way, the truth, and the life (14:6); I am the true vine (15:1). Seven, of course, is the biblical number for perfection, which was another way of revealing Jesus' total identity with the Father. The most shocking and direct statement that Jesus made about His union with the Father is also found in John's Gospel (8:58) when he claimed: "Before Abraham was, *I am*." Jesus alone is the total and perfect revelation of the Father.

This Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is therefore equal to and one with God the Father. He is the same Source of our life, our holiness, and our strength. And for that very reason, He is our very identity as Catholic Men. Bishop Olmsted explains this dynamic so beautifully:

Only in Jesus Christ can we find the highest display of masculine virtue and strength that we need in our personal lives and in society itself.... The Father sent

his Son to reveal what it means to be a man, and the fullness of this revelation becomes evident on the Cross. He tells us that it was for this reason that He came into the world, that it is his earnest desire to give himself totally to us. Herein lies the fullness of masculinity; each Catholic man must be prepared to give himself completely, to charge into the breach, to engage in spiritual combat, to defend women, children, and others against the wickedness and snares of the devil!

It is only Jesus who reveals to us who we are and who we are called to be. Jesus draws into the life of the Father through the process of transformation from the values of this world to the values of the Kingdom, a transformation that can only happen through Jesus Christ.

With Jesus as our source of “masculine virtue and strength,” we are able to see through the false “heroes” that the secular culture proposes to men as worthy of imitation. One of my favorite passages in Bishop Olmsted’s letter is where he points out how utterly empty as a model for manhood is the image of James Bond – the famous Agent 007 – who is no doubt familiar to all of us. This fictional spy, however, is actually *an anti-hero* according to the deepest values of Christianity. He lives without any obvious moral scruples; he is intensely promiscuous; and his life is one of unrelenting excitement, lack of attachment, and irresponsibility. There is even a great irony in his name, “Bond”, because, in fact, *he has no bonds or commitments at all* – except to himself. When men adopt this model of manhood, there is no wonder that our society has so many breaches in its walls.

How different is the man who models himself on the masculine example of Jesus Christ! In Him we learn our identity, we discover strength for our commitments, we learn to sacrifice ourselves for others, and we are able to grow in virtue because of our bonded relationship with the Father. Bishop Olmsted notes again:

Simply put, our identity is caught up in the identity of the eternal Son of God....  
When we speak of conversion, we are speaking about an acceptance of and growth into this identity. When we speak about sin, we are speaking of all that takes us away from our identity as beloved sons of the Father. Since this is our

identity – being beloved sons of God the Father – is it surprising that the devil is waging a fierce battle on masculinity and fatherhood in our day?

The devil, indeed, does not want virtuous men standing in the breach to defend the innocent and the sacred. He does not want the moral strength of Christ-like fatherhood and manhood to come against him. He does not want to be opposed by men who know how to “fight the good fight of faith.” (1 Tim 6:12) If the devil has gained strength in the sinful structures of modern society, it is simply because godly men have abandoned the battlefield. But we are called by our Church to return to the battlefield with renewed strength and fervor.

Thankfully, in this effort we are not alone. In addition to Christ Himself, we also have the examples of the many heroic saints of our Faith to accompany us on our journey to Heaven. As Jesus is the perfect image of the Father, so the saints are images of Jesus that the Church proposes to us for inspiration and encouragement. Bishop Olmsted says that each of us should have a patron saint or even a personally-chosen saint whose example of virtue and heroism appeals to us. The saints become our friends and *companion soldiers* in the battles of life. They prove to us that there are many paths to holiness. The saints speak to us and inspire each of us in different ways, often according to our particular personalities and interests. They are ongoing gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church in every age, and the Church will never be lacking in heroic models of sanctity.

Even today we don't have to look far for saints. Many of you will remember the Internet video from this time last year which showed the brutal beheading of twenty-one Christian men from Libya who were martyred for no other reason than their belief in Jesus Christ. The brother of one of the martyrs afterward relayed the story of what his mother had said, *when asked what she would do if she ever met the man who had beheaded her son*. “My mother, an uneducated woman in her sixties, said she would ask [this man] to enter her house and ask God to open his eyes because he was the reason her son entered the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>1</sup> The martyr who refused to renounce Christ in the face of a threat of death obviously learned a heroic love for Christ from a woman with such great charity. Surely we must recognize the authority of parental

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Jean Lopez, *National Review*, “Heaven in the Face of Hell,” February 23, 2015.

holiness behind the martyrdom of that man. We, as natural and spiritual fathers, are called to have *that kind of impact* on the souls entrusted to our care.

Do you have patron saints, dear brothers? My parents did me the great honor of naming me after one of the twenty-six martyrs of Nagasaki, who were among the first missionaries to evangelize Japan after St. Francis Xavier in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. St. Felipe de Jesus has always been a great source of inspiration to me and assistance in my priestly ministry, especially as regards areas of evangelization. He has helped me to maintain a strong missionary spirit in my priestly work. In 1998, I visited the site of his martyrdom in Japan, and I shall never forget the inspiration I drew from his example of total sacrifice of self for others at that place. If you do not have a patron saint from birth, you can and should choose one for your particular mission, for your particular battle. And thankfully, there are so many examples of saints, *both canonized and not*, who may serve as inspiration and encouragement to us in our vocations.

Now, the core of Bishop Olmsted's letter has to do with *our ability to maintain our personal identity in Christ*. Thankfully, there is no mystery in this. No heroics are needed other than the commitment to remain faithful to Christ by staying close to the sources of holiness that have been handed down to us through the Church. The Church's means of sanctification not only *make us holy* by our participation in them but also *increase our desire to be holy*. The sacraments, the Scriptures, the saints, and the devotional life of the Church – all these gifts of holiness are given to us, freely, in order to sanctify us and fill us with the very life of God. They also remind us that we do not achieve Heaven by our own virtue. We achieve it by fidelity to Christ on a daily basis. I love St Augustin's prayer to the Holy Spirit: **Breath in me, Oh Holy Spirit..**

Bishop Olmsted outlines seven "Practices of the Committed Catholic Man," which I present to you both as an encouragement and as a challenge. Even though faith in Christ does not usually require the heroic deeds of the martyrs, *daily fidelity* to Christ is nonetheless difficult. It requires commitment and persistence. It leads to a purification of heart, mind, and will – through grace – over a long period of time. Holiness is not the work of a day, it is the fruit of a lifetime of fidelity. The letter outlines five daily or weekly practices and two monthly practices that communicate grace and sustain the souls of anyone who is faithful to them. We can feel Bishop



Olmsted's enthusiasm when he says, "If these practices are not (yet) part of your life, *start now!*" And that is good advice! The seven practices are the following:

1. **Pray every day** – every Catholic Man's life has room for prayer, but not every man is committed to praying. It is only by a daily commitment to prayer in some form or another that we grow in familiarity with the Lord and enter into the life of the Father.
2. **Examine your conscience** – the daily review of our inner life at the end of the day has helped more than one Catholic Man to grow both in sensitivity to his own sinfulness and to the workings of the Holy Spirit in his life. It is a necessary practice for all of us, myself included, and it leads, in time, to a profound self-awareness in Christ.
3. **Go to Mass** – needless to say, this is one of the most fundamental commitments of our lives of faith. Holy Mass is the most direct participation in the Life of Christ and His sacrifice on Calvary that we can experience, and it is utterly necessary for our sanctification. Bishop Olmsted reminds us that "The Mass is a refuge in the Spiritual Battle, where Catholic men meet their King, hear His commands, and become strengthened with the Bread of Life."
4. **Read the Bible** – the Word of God is a source of spiritual life and strength that we neglect to our own detriment. Each day or at least several times a week we should seek inspiration from the pages of Scripture in order to be more fully acquainted with the Living Word of God. As St. Jerome said: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."
5. **Keep the Sabbath** – here the Bishop is calling for a much-needed renewal of our concept of holy rest and reverence for the law of God which is so easily set aside in our activity-oriented society. Fidelity to the Sabbath allows us to deepen our relationships with God and with our families.
6. **Go to Confession** – it is recommended to participate in the Sacrament of Confession on a monthly basis. It is a healing and strengthening force in our ongoing battle against sin, and those who remain faithful to the practice of frequent confession will reap the fruit of their fidelity in lives of greater virtue and purity.
7. **Build fraternity with other Catholic Men** – in the Book of Genesis, God said that "Man is not meant to be alone," (Gen 2:18) and this has perhaps never been more true than in the modern age when so many forces divide us and privatize our lives. Companionship with brothers in the Faith truly strengthens us and keep us striving for the ideals of

Catholic manhood. What you are doing in this conference, brothers, is such a blessing. I pray that you will leave this conference fortified by your fraternal sharing and more equipped to fight the spiritual and cultural battles that lay ahead of us.

As a final comment on Bishop Olmsted's letter: Did you notice how Bishop phrased his seven practices as *commands* instead of *suggestions*?! There is good reason for that. The Bishop is not afraid to challenge us and to speak forcefully to men about "doing what is right." He knows that true men of faith will "step into the breach" and respond to the many challenges that lie before us in church and society. He trusts your God-given gift of faith, and so do I! As all warfare requires courage, I exhort you to "be not afraid!" of the sacrifices required to go through the sometimes painful transformation of your manhood from the values of the world to the values of the Kingdom. It is Christ our King who leads us, and we have nothing at all to fear when following Him.

I will conclude this talk, dear brothers, with a challenge of my own. In fact, it comes from St. John Paul II who often issued this call to *authentic Christian heroism* during the many World Youth Day celebrations that he held throughout his long pontificate. Let this challenge always echo in your hearts and minds as well as in your life of Christian service to the souls God has entrusted to your care. The Holy Father said,

Never, ever settle for less than the spiritual and moral greatness with which, by God's grace, you are capable. Don't ever settle for anything less than that. You will fail. But that is no reason to lower the bar of expectation. Get up, dust yourself off, seek reconciliation and forgiveness, and go forward, more attuned to the grace of God in your life. But don't lower the bar. Never settle for anything less than the spiritual and moral grandeur that is nascent in you, and that the cross of Christ makes available to you through the grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

The spiritual and moral greatness that St. John Paul speaks about is nothing less than the heroic Catholic Manhood that you strive for daily.

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<sup>2</sup> George Weigel, "The Spiritual Fatherhood of John Paul II", Ethics & Public Policy Center, 4/9/2015. <http://eppc.org/publications/thespiritualfatherhoodofjohnpaulii/>.

I pray that God will bless your vocations and your families with an abundance of blessings from His Fatherly Heart, **and I bless you, dear brothers, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!**