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As you know, I like to end Mass with a joke, with mixed reviews, often silence! Probably, that's why I am always receiving jokes from parishioners, hoping to help me. Believe me, I'm grateful for any material! Here's one I recently received, but after I read it, I realized that it actually fits into my theme for this week's Letter. It was told by Archbishop Sheen, soon to be Venerable, during one of his shows.

...Murphy died and went to Heaven. He was curious about the other place, so he asked God if he could visit hell. Reluctantly, God agreed. So, down he went. Well, it was wonderful. Everyone was having a good time and the food was great. In short, it was amazing. After he returned to Heaven, Murphy asked if he could make another visit. In fact, he ended up visiting hell several times. Finally, Murphy decided that everything was so wonderful down there that he decided to ask permission to stay. God respected his free will and his wish was granted. This time, however, things were rather different. It was awful. There was fire, pain, a terrible stench, demons everywhere and no one was happy. Murphy confronted the devil. He said that during his visits, everything was so great. What happened? The devil, with his evil smile, declared, "Then you were only a tourist, now you're a resident!" ...

The joke is really a parable and makes a profound point, as noted by Bishop Sheen. The devil is a deceiver and presents himself smiling, friendly, inviting and even helpful...until you give him control. Then, he reveals his true nature and evil designs. There are many examples if you start to think about it. Drug dealers and human traffickers present themselves as wanting to help, but with only one thing in mind. They have no concern for the person, but only profit. Many evil empires began with grand promises, ending up in domination and death.

The bottom line is that the devil presents himself as nice, until exposed. I am reminded of the story in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus encounters two demoniacs. "When He came to the other side, in the territory of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs who were coming from the tombs met Him. They were so savage that no one could travel by that road." (Matthew 8:28). I refer to this passage because I have seen images of people demonstrating who spew vile and hateful slogans, often yelling and screaming. Along the same lines, I have seen "dialogues" between two people where one side does not allow the other person to speak, but merely shouts over them. When confronted and exposed, evil rears its ugly head and reveals its true colors. I am not in any way suggesting that these people are possessed, but the anger and hatred that is exhibited remind me of stories when the presence of the devil is manifested.

St. Paul states, "For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens." (Ephesians 6:12)

It is frustrating and concerning that so much of what we see around us is evaluated in only human terms and is thus too easily dismissed. Yes, there is a human factor, but there is definitely a spiritual battle afoot. The point of all of this is to remind us of the importance of prayer, in fact, the necessity of prayer. We need prayer, protection and discernment. And, while we seek to be spiritually vigilant, remember Jesus wins!

"And He said to them, 'Go then!' They came out and entered the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea where they drowned." (Matthew 8:32)