

I “Change your thoughts and you change your world.” I found that quote on the wall of a doctor’s office one time and discovered that it is attributed to Norman Vincent Peale who promoted The Power of Positive Thinking and wrote a book by that name. I never read his books but we know or should know thoughts are powerful and they do matter in our lives.

A. In the first reading the Prophet Isaiah calls for the wicked to forsake his thoughts, the idea being that wicked thoughts precede wicked behavior. Wickedness is born in the heart or mind first and from there can become speech and behavior. The prophet also reminds us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and God’s ways not our ways. The actual quote is “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.” The same idea is at work. First come the thoughts then comes the way to live, our way of being. Since God’s thoughts are above our thoughts then God’s ways are also above our ways. One follows the other. So thoughts are important in that they can influence or even determine our behavior.

None of this may surprise us if we have been self-reflective enough to notice it.

- B. However, we might be surprised to know not all of our thoughts are our own. Let me repeat that. Not all of our thoughts are our own. Now on a human level teachers can clearly recognize the reality of this idea in their students. If a student in middle school or high school is stating an opinion on a current issue there is a good chance the teacher is hearing what his parents are saying at home. Thus a wise teacher will also know that how she addresses that opinion will get back to the parents. Of course today, the internet and social media influence many of the thoughts of our children, grandchildren and even our own thoughts.
- C. However, our thoughts **can** be divinely inspired which is wonderful. We end up directing our lives in a loving and giving way, developing a good Catholic Christian behavior and way of being. We become the person God made us to be. We become that best version of ourselves as Matthew Kelly would say. But that identity as a child of God does not go unchallenged. Certainly our culture can and does challenge that identity and the behavior associated with it but the most dangerous challenge to our God given identity comes from Satan. This challenge by Satan against us

and God is what we call spiritual warfare and no one is exempt from it.

- D. One of the greatest masters of this spiritual battle is St. Ignatius Loyola the founder of the Society of Jesus, popularly known as the Jesuits. He knew very well through his own life experience about the good and bad spirits. He no doubt was inspired by the first letter of St. John which says, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God (1 John 4: 1). To test the spirit is called discernment, a central concern for St. Ignatius and all subsequent spiritual directors. “To discern is to understand and decide on a course of action regarding inspirations that influence our thoughts, words, and deeds either toward God to heaven or away from Him to hell” (Spiritual Warfare and the Discernment of Spirits, Dan Burke). You can find Dan Burke on line.
- E. Mr. Burke says in his book that it is generally understood that demons can put thoughts in our heads and make suggestions to us. This basic assumption is foundational to St. Ignatius’s understanding of spiritual warfare. Burke tells his students “All the thoughts in your head are not yours, and you shouldn’t listen to them” (ibid).
- F. A common tactic of the enemy is to try to direct our thoughts from the present moment to the past or the

future. If we are a past-oriented person the tactic will be to remind us of our past sins, weaknesses and failures to convince us that we cannot possibly move forward and closer to God and neighbor. Or, the tactic may move us to think of injustices and unkindness that were done to us in the past so we relive them in our minds in a fantasized way that we win. But, whatever peace we did have was lost because we got riled up about the mistreatment we received. If we are a future oriented person, or prone to worry about the future, we will see visions of failure that are meant to persuade us not to move forward with the good we wish to accomplish.

- G. In this spiritual battle prayer is essential. One prayerful practice is at the end of the day to review the thoughts and actions we had that day. What were the negative or dark thoughts, and what thoughts brought us to goodness and peace? Do the same examination with our actions. When were we tempted to move into the past or future? Through the “Ignatian examen” as it is called, we can begin to see patterns of how God and good spirits, or Satan and evil spirits, operate in our lives.
- H. Before turning to God, Ignatius was a man of war. He began to reflect upon his life and the good and evil spirits acting in his life was when a cannon ball tore into his leg and he was laid up for months. He saw

the devil, like a military leader planning to take a fort, only now the fort was the structure that surrounded his soul. Ignatius developed and expanded this idea to include all of humanity. The gates of entry into the soul are the virtues or lack thereof in our lives. The gates are strong or weak. He found that the enemy's greatest success is through the gate of our dominant fault or root sin. The first letter of John reflects on three root sins; pride, vanity, and sensuality. As a root sin, pride means being attached to our own importance and self-sufficiency. Vanity is being attached to what others think of us. Sensuality in this context means being attached to pleasure, to being comfortable, to the easy way.

- I. We need to know our own sinful tendencies. This kind of self-knowledge is not the kind presented by pop psychology. "This self-knowledge is an understanding of ourselves that comes when we spend time with Jesus in prayer, when we read and meditate on Scripture, and when we allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us about our sins and God's plan for us. The more we know ourselves, the less vulnerable we are to the enemy's attacks" (ibid). Know we are not alone in this spiritual warfare. The divine power is with us.