

One of the few redeeming qualities of the *Star Wars* prequel *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* is a famous line spoken by the Jedi Master Yoda who questions the young Anakin Skywalker who tragically becomes the evil Darth Vader later in the story. I'm sorry if I just ruined *Star Wars* for anyone who's never seen it. But as he's conversing with young Anakin, Yoda famously states: "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. I sense much fear in you." I'm sorry I can't do the Yoda voice.

This iconic line from the *Star Wars* saga that foreshadows the dark fate of Anakin Skywalker really emphasizes the element of fear in human life. In today's Gospel, our Lord Jesus talks to us about fear in the context of the spiritual life and discipleship and He really distinguishes between two types of fear that in the long theological Tradition of the Church have come to be known as "servile fear" and "holy fear," which is also known as "filial fear" or "Fear of the Lord."

First, what is "holy fear"? I think many times when we hear this we can become uncomfortable thinking that the Church is trying to foster an unhealthy fear of God as if He was some "evil, monstrous

dictator Who's out to get us.” But this is *exactly the opposite* of what “holy fear” is and what the Church teaches.

“Holy fear” is one of the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit and it's a realistic recognition of the infinite power, love, and goodness of God our Father. It consists of a reverential wonder and awe at the nature of God and His unique divine ability to exact true and perfect justice against evil. Since one affirms the all-powerful nature and goodness of God, holy fear also consists of a desire *not to offend* God with one's sins and evil behavior, since God is all-deserving of our love and fidelity.

And so holy fear is rooted in a selfless love for God. Commenting on holy fear, St. Francis de Sales said: “We should fear God out of love and not love Him out of fear.” The gift of holy fear enables us to know that God loves us with an everlasting love and *therefore deserves our love in return* by how we live our life in pursuit of virtue and holiness. In fact, in the Gospel today, Jesus basically reassures us that *God is a loving Father* Who in His providence and power provides for our every need and cares for us as His beloved children.

So now, what is “servile fear”? One could define “servile fear” as “an unpleasant emotion caused by the *false* belief that God, His Church, holiness, our Catholic faith, or loving our neighbor poses a grave danger or threat to us.” This is a type of *negative* fear that Jesus essentially refers to 3 times in today’s Gospel when He says, “Do not fear them” and “do not be afraid.” In the context of our relationship with Christ, servile fear prevents us from being faithful disciples of Jesus.

Servile fear prevents us from truly loving Christ with every fiber of our being. It stops us from becoming all Who God has created us to be. Such fear is a dark, destructive, and paralyzing fear that’s really one of the greatest weapons of the devil—a weapon he uses to rip us apart from God and to ultimately to destroy us. Servile fear can be based on lies that we tell ourselves or on the lies and temptations of the devil and the fallen world around us.

Such debilitating fear can also be based on our own false, narrow-minded perceptions of reality. Many times, we can *think and perceive* that something poses a grave danger to us, when in reality, it doesn’t.

Servile fear can cause great stress and anxiety in our lives, stress and anxiety that the Lord wants to liberate us from.

Servile fear can be rooted in selfishness and it constitutes a stubborn refusal to humbly trust in Jesus and to allow Him to sanctify and transform our lives. Servile fear not only harms and destroys our relationship with Christ, but it can also harm and destroy our relationships with others. Someone who is enslaved by servile fear can constantly view others as the enemy with grave suspicion, distrust, and even hatred. Ultimately servile fear prevents us from loving God and others and *allowing God and others* to truly love us.

So in the context of *servile fear* and our Catholic faith: what are we afraid of? Are we afraid of God for some reason? Are we afraid that God won't forgive us for a certain sin that we've committed? Are we afraid of trusting in our Heavenly Father and in His loving will for our lives? Are we afraid of conversion and repentance—of turning away from our “favorite sins,” if you will, and fully embracing the new life of holiness that God wants to give us? Are we afraid of abandoning ourselves entirely to Christ because of what that may mean for our lives?

Are we afraid of the cross, which is the instrument of our salvation? Are we afraid to live our Catholic faith and to courageously witness to Christ and His Church in public, and among our family, friends, and co-workers? Are we afraid of suffering persecution, rejection, and mockery for the sake of Christ and His Church?

Yesterday was the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Commenting on this great Feast day, Pope Benedict XVI said this: "The essential nucleus of Christianity is expressed in the heart of Jesus; in Christ the whole of the revolutionary newness of the Gospel was revealed and given to us: the Love that saves us and already makes us live in God's eternity. Even our shortcomings, our limitations, and our weaknesses must lead us back to the Heart of Jesus. His divine Heart calls to our hearts, inviting us to come out of ourselves, to abandon our human certainties to trust in him and, following his example, to make ourselves a gift of love without reserve."

Brothers and sisters, if we immerse ourselves in the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, then we won't be crippled by servile fear as disciples of Christ. If we humbly surrender ourselves to the Sacred Heart of Jesus,

then with the help of grace, we will overcome the fears that might plague our faith and truly become the best version of ourselves. If we allow Christ to transform our hearts into His Sacred Heart, then we will enjoy the true freedom, peace, and happiness that we long for.

In a post-Resurrection world where our Savior has victoriously conquered the forces of sin and death, servile fear is truly useless. As we come before our Eucharistic Lord today in this mass, let's ask Christ to banish from our hearts and minds any fears that we may have that are preventing us from giving ourselves completely to Him in love and fidelity. And let's remember the Heavenly words of our merciful Savior today and everyday: "do not be afraid."