

I saw the other week that John “Paddy” Hemingway has died at the age 105. He was the last of “the few,” the British fighter pilots who fought in the Battle of Britain against Hitler’s Luftwaffe.

The news recalled for me Winston Churchill’s words to the British Parliament on June 18, 1940, at the darkest time of World War II. He bluntly laid out the situation to the nation after the route of the allied armies in France and the evacuation at Dunkirk. “The Battle of France is over,” he said. “The Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization . . . if we fail, then the whole world . . . including all we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age . . . Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire . . . last[s] a thousand years, men will say this was their finest hour.”

This was not said from a position of honor. Britain had turned her back on the small countries of Europe as Hitler rose. Her leadership had appeased Hitler for years, hoping to compromise with evil. And when

Britain had at last been forced to fight, she had been routed on the field of battle. And now Churchill and the British were facing the Battle of Britain in which the Luftwaffe would bomb the major cities of the nation to rubble . . . and still Churchill was prophetic. Thanks to Paddy Hemingway and company, it did turn out to be Britain's finest hour. Because they at last stood up to evil and wouldn't surrender to it.

That makes me think of we Catholics amidst the growing chaos and evil of the world today. Another death: ex-Cardinal McCarrick died April 4: a man who betrayed Jesus and the Church – and was ignored or abetted by too many in high positions. He is an example of how things seem to be falling apart. Not just in the world. Think of the scandals in the Church -- the sexual abuse of minors and financial corruption– bad leadership at all levels – confusion, doubt, infidelity, moral cowardice.

And yet! – with faith, we could say this is the greatest time in the Church's history to be a Catholic. Yes, there is sin and evil within and without. But God is purifying us, and any time throughout history God

has done that to His people it has resulted in deep pain, but then something new and powerful. And we're part of that, whether we wanted to be or not. The only thing we must decide is how we will act in this time of God's judgment.

Like Britain in the face of the rise of Nazism, we Catholics have spent too long cooperating with evil, or pretending it wasn't happening. But now the sin and crimes are coming into the open. Civilization is at stake; a new dark age approaches. We can abandon the field. Or we can fight this spiritual war.

What will we each do in this time of God's judgment upon us? Today in the Passion narrative we heard what Jesus did. He died on the cross for these sins of ours. He died to defeat the Devil and his evil – the sin of that time and all time – including ours. He paid the ultimate price in this greatest of wars. And He won the victory! Let us not forget that. But how will we behave in the battle we each still face? Will we remain faithful in this time of doubt? Stand, fight, and suffer alongside

Jesus -- or surrender? We may not be "the few," but we have certainly become fewer. So be it. We can be Paddy Hemingways. This can be our finest hour too, if we choose the battle and the cross, because with it comes a glorious resurrection. That is the situation and choice facing the Church and each of us in this time and this Holy Week.