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Combat, Closeness, Mission (3): Everything is Ours and Everything is God’s

Any sport requires effort, but it brings enjoyment and opens up new possibilities. So it is with the Christian life: in the midst of combat and struggle, we can enjoy being with the Lord, growing and facing new challenges with Him.

06/06/2024

"You have become a new creation and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven."[1] From ancient times, the Church has had the tradition of dressing new converts in white to visibly express the joy of becoming one with Christ, of letting Him live in us.[2] Both the name and the act of baptizing reflect this reality: *baptizein* means to immerse, because through this sacrament we enter into the life of the Trinity, like a sponge that goes into the water and, without ceasing to be itself, becomes one with what it is submerged in. Thus, it is "an interpenetration of being in God and of our being, a being immersed in God the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; just as it is in marriage, for example. Two people become one

flesh, they become a new and unique reality with a new and unique name.."[3] From that moment on, caring for this new life becomes a daily task, requiring constant spiritual combat, as Scripture warns: "My child, if you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials. Straighten your heart, remain firm, and do not be alarmed when trouble comes. Cling to Him and do not leave, so that you may be exalted at the end" (Sirach 2:1-3).

The Starting Point: God Loves Us Unconditionally

In our Baptism, God has told us forever that He loves us as we are, no matter what happens. This conviction is the starting point on the interior journey; without it, we would be running on the wrong path because, in this race, it is not about earning anything by ourselves or proving anything to anyone but

living freely, enjoying God's love. "We have come to know and believe in the love God has for us," St. John writes (1 John 4:16). Following these words of the Gospel, St. Josemaría says: "We must let these truths of faith fill our soul until they change our life. God loves us!"[4]

At the same time, God's grace does not replace our intelligent and persevering effort: "The firm hope of our personal sanctification is a gift from God, but man cannot remain passive."[5] It is true that, by grace, our life has a value that exceeds our possibilities, but grace does not replace nature: it needs to work with it. One could say that in our life, everything is ours, and at the same time, everything is God's. "Over the continuity of small daily events, pleasant or painful, foreseen or unforeseen, runs the parallel series of actual graces that are offered to us at every moment. (...) Little by little,

a conversation will be established between Him and us that will be the true interior life."[6]

Thus, it would be reductive to describe this life that unfolds in the human heart only with words like "struggle" or "combat." What seems like combat, seen from the perspective of the resistance we encounter inside and outside ourselves, can be seen as activity, movement, dynamism, and growth, when integrated into the big picture. These aspects of the development of any living being — which include the struggle against threats or difficulties of the environment, as part of that same development — more successfully express the richness of the spiritual life.

Look at the Landscape, Not Only at the Ground

Mountaineers and high-altitude cyclists know the necessity of

concentration in effort and energy rationing; hence, they often advance looking almost exclusively at the ground. However, it would be a shame if this concentration prevented them from enjoying the panorama that opens up around them as they progress. In spiritual combat, something similar can happen to us: we might focus too much on the evil we want to overcome or see only the cost of achieving some good. Therefore, it is always good to lift our gaze so as not to lose sight of everything we are gaining along the way.

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21), writes St. Paul in a verse that St. Josemaría sometimes summarized as "drowning evil in an abundance of good."[7] Christian combat is not so much a fight against sin as an effort to nurture the life given to us from our baptism. For example, if we

leave the best for others on one occasion, we can see this overcoming as a fight against selfishness or as an exercise not to cling to certain things; but better yet, we can see it as a struggle to enlarge the heart, to grow in love, generosity, detachment, etc. And this not out of an individual desire for perfection, but because, from the heart of Christ, we want to live for others.

These two different ways of focusing on Christian combat are also linked to two ways of formulating improvement purposes. In this sense, instead of proposing "*not* doing such-and-such a thing again," it can be much more enriching to lift our gaze, contemplate the horizon, and affirm what we do want to do. *In omnibus respice finem*, says a classic adage: "in all things, look to the end"; or, in a more current formulation, "start with why." To live with our eyes on the goal, it is often necessary to take

distance from the concrete situation, take the time to reflect, to share our impressions with God. Then we will see better: we will realize that what is at stake is not only an immediate purpose, a small concrete battle, but our openness to God's grace, to God making us another Jesus, *alter Christus*.

Struggling is Already Loving

"My children, let us not love in word or speech but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:18). No one feels truly loved when love, affirmed with all kinds of declarations and promises, is later contradicted by actions. Therefore, with each of our decisions, we respond to Jesus' question to Peter: "Do you love me?" (John 21:16). "The Christian life," wrote the Prelate of Opus Dei, "is a free response, imbued with initiative and availability, to our Lord's question."[8] Each moment we

overcome our selfishness, each effort to grow in this or that virtue that will allow us to serve better, each time we choose humility over our desire to assert ourselves against others, we are wordlessly telling God: I love you more.

"This is our destiny on earth: to struggle for Love until the last instant," St. Josemaría once wrote, taking stock at the end of the year.[9] Struggling for love is much more than simply adding a motive of love to the struggle from outside: "While talking to Our Lord in your prayer you understood that fighting is a synonym for Love, and you asked for a greater Love."[10] Spiritual combat is more necessary than victory because "as long as there is struggle, ascetical struggle, there is interior life. That is what our Lord is asking of us: the will to want to love him with deeds, in the little things of every day."[11] And what turns the struggle into love

is the purpose of the fight: why I fight and for whom I fight. These answers shape the very combat; they become the foundation of its development.

Reading the lives of saints, we may imagine spiritual combat as the struggle of heroes striving to the limit, facing difficult tasks that demand great inner strength, uncommon courage. The saint would thus appear as someone who "performs some type of “gymnastics” of holiness, something unattainable by normal people."[12] However, this impression does not capture the essence of the saints' secret; what matters at the end — and at every moment of the journey — is love, charity, which comes from God. "Even martyrdom receives its greatness not from an act of fortitude but primarily from a heroic act of marvelous charity. The three centuries of persecution of the early Church were certainly times of

courage, of heroic fortitude, but even more so of ardent love for God."[13]

Sometimes, an excessive desire for security can lead us to a quantitative approach to the struggle, where we want to measure our progress, as if facing a personalized training plan to improve physical fitness. Certainly, it is important to make resolutions to improve, to surpass oneself in many aspects, to make sacrifices, but all that is not necessarily a sign of the progress we aim to ensure. Holiness, said St. Josemaría, "does not consist in doing more difficult things every day, but in doing them every day with greater love."[14] What bears spiritual fruit is not doing arduous things, but responding with love to that first love God has for us; holiness "doesn't mean that one has done great things by oneself, but rather that in one's life realities appear that one has not done on one's own, because that person let

God enter and made himself available for God's work."[15] Therefore, because everything begins with the gratuitous will of God who has given us the gift of Baptism and Christian life within us, we can understand what Scripture tells us: "It depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy" (Romans 9:16).

Knowing that all works of holiness begin with a divine impulse, that it is God who started His work and He who will bring it to completion: this marks our understanding of the spiritual battle. We do not "earn points" with God so that we deserve His love: He continuously gives Himself to us, no matter what. "The Church has repeatedly taught that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative. (...) His friendship infinitely transcends us; we cannot buy it with our works,

it can only be a gift born of his loving initiative. (…) Like the supreme commandment of love, this truth should affect the way we live, for it flows from the heart of the Gospel and demands that we not only accept it intellectually but also make it a source of contagious joy."[16]

Like a Sport

Where is it best to begin and begin again? On what concrete front of the soul does this struggle start? The answer is personal, but a good clue can be detecting our most present defect, because it is often something intimately related to our way of being. For example, if we are very forceful by temperament, this way of being could frequently degenerate into brusqueness; or if our personal characteristic is kindness, the main defect could be softness or timidity. The fight will focus on excluding, first, everything contrary to the love

of God (that is, mortal sin) then those things that prevent our love from rising to the Lord and others (that is, venial sins) and, finally and always, also the ways we fall short in love (mediocrity). This is an entire program of life that St. Nicholas of Flue condensed into a few verses: "My Lord and my God, take from me everything that distances me from you. My Lord and my God, give me everything that brings me closer to you. My Lord and my God, free me from myself to give myself entirely to you."[17]

St. Josemaría liked to compare this struggle to sports: "The ascetical struggle is not something negative and therefore hateful, but rather a joyful affirmation. It is a sport."[18] Any sport requires effort but brings enjoyment through interaction with others, new experiences, and the joy of surpassing oneself... Similarly, with a little training, we can begin to

have a good time with the Lord in the midst of spiritual struggle. Thus, we will see objective difficulties not only as obstacles but also opportunities for our life in God to develop. If we accept difficulties as a challenge, they will bother us much less. It will also change the way we look at those around us, especially those with whom we perhaps have less affinity: "Don't say: 'That person gets on my nerves.' Think: 'That person sanctifies me.'"[19]

A key factor in sports training is consistency. Great victories are not achieved in a single day. Sometimes many attempts are needed. "An athlete perseveres, a good athlete spends a great deal of time training and preparing himself. If it is a question of jumping, he tries again and again."[20] Small steps, with tenacity and perseverance, finally lead to success. In this sense, it is often more effective to make small

and concrete resolutions, to live them consistently, than to make great resolutions that we often leave unfulfilled. Moreover, in the battles of the soul, it is necessary to count on time, to begin and begin again, to redo the resolutions with humility and creativity, as many times as necessary. A response of love is realized discreetly throughout a lifetime.

As in sports, in the spiritual life, defeats are also part of the game. But, just as "there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need repentance" (Luke 15:7), we can consider that our Lord rejoices more over our little victories and “restarts” than over the things that were already going well. There is always more to do, but we should never simply carry on after a victory. Victories are meant to be savored:

each step forward is a moment to thank God and draw new strength. We must also not forget that we are not alone in our struggle. Like athletes, we have people around us, placed by God, who help us to train and to surpass ourselves. We can count on the prayer and support of our brothers and sisters in faith, on those who have preceded us and help us from heaven, and on our guardian angel and our Mother Mary.

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[1] Rite of Baptism of Children

[2] Cf. Rm 13:14; Gal 2:20.

[3] Benedict XVI, Lectio Divina, 11-VI-2012.

[4] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 144.

[5] Ibíd., no. 176.

[6] R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, Volume I, pg. 184ff.

[7] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 864.

[8] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter 9-I-2018, no. 5.

[9] St. Josemaría, *In Dialogue with the Lord*, no. 137.

[10] *Furrow,* n. 158.

[11] St. Josemaría, *Way of the Cross*, 3ª estación.

[12] J. Ratzinger "Letting God Work." Translation of the original in L'Osservatore Romano, 6-X-2002. Available on www.opusdei.org

[13] R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, Volume I, pg. 167.

[14] St. Josemaría, Notes from his preaching (AGP, P10, n. 25), qtd. by E. Burkhart and J. López, *Vida Cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, Rialp, Madrid 2013, vol. II, pg. 295.

[15] J. Ratzinger "Letting God Work," *ABC*, 6-X-2002.

[16] Francis,*Gaudete et exsultate*, nos. 52, 54, 55.

[17] This prayer can be found, for instance, in the prayer pronounced by St. John Paul II at the tomb of the saint on 14 June 1984. St. Josemaría prayed with similar words: "Separate from me, Lord, whatever separates me from you!" (cf. A .Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Rialp, Madrid, 2003, vol. 3, pg. 462).

[18] St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 169.

[19] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 174.

[20] St. Josemaría, *In Dialogue with the Lord,* no. 51.

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