

## Discipleship and Spiritual Warfare (Battle)

The Renewal has brought a new awareness of spiritual battle into the life of the Catholic Church. Whenever the Holy Spirit is awakened in people's lives, they become aware that there are other spirits at work, that are not so holy. The Second Vatican Council brought a higher vision of the role of all the baptized (and so of all lay people) within the Church. The dignity of every Christian is rooted in their baptism and in their own relationship within the Church (in a context of communion) to the Father, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. While this was taught by the Council, it may be the Renewal that has been the foremost instrument for making this teaching a reality. The dignity of each lay person is related too to their direct access to the Scriptures, to their active participation in the liturgy, to their role in the work of evangelization, to their responsibilities in society and to their freedom of conscience within the body of Christ that teaches and forms them. For today's theme, lay Catholics through the Renewal find themselves involved in spiritual battle as they seek to live more faithfully as disciples of Jesus.

First, we are caught up in spiritual battle simply by living as disciples through the power of the Holy Spirit. The devil doesn't want us to grow and he doesn't want us to be instruments of the Lord. So as we open to the Holy Spirit we will come under attack. The main part of this teaching will address this, which is part of our daily lives as believers. We must not think of spiritual battle as something that is only the task of special Christians or of as something that we only do on special occasions or in critical situations. Very important passages in the New Testament here are found in Rom. 12: 2, 2 Cor. 10: 4 – 5 and Eph. 6: 10 – 20. I want to stress four points from these passages: 1. the battle is above all in the **mind** and concerns what and how we think; 2. sanctification requires **renewal of our minds**; 3. The key role of defensive weapons; 4. Paul's emphasis in Ephesians on **standing**.

### Battle of/in the Mind

“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Cor. 10: 4 – 5). When Paul speaks of demolishing strongholds, we could easily imagine military pictures of castles being overthrown, walled cities being captured. We could have a James Bond model for the spiritual warrior, someone who goes out and kills demons on every side. But what are these strongholds? They concern the knowledge of God and taking captive our thoughts. Here we must not model our practice on military methods: “the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.” These weapons do not involve violence. We will turn later to consider the weapons. The battle is in the mind. The enemy seeks to feed us with lies; Jesus says of the enemy:

“When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8: 44). Do all untrue thoughts come from the devil? I think not. Our stupidity, our laziness, such weaknesses are quite enough to explain much false thinking. The signs that thoughts come from the devil and are forms of spiritual attack are (1) that the consequences of believing and accepting these thoughts are out of proportion to the wrong ideas; and (2) they have immediately destructive effects (e.g. depression, hopelessness, a passivity and total lack of interest in any positive action). The attack can come through thoughts about ourselves, thoughts about other people, or through more ideological thoughts.

Thoughts about Ourselves: we are all familiar with these ways of thinking:

- I am a failure. Nobody appreciates me.
- God does not love me.
- I am under a curse.
- It is useless trying to do anything.

Thoughts about Others:

- Angry thoughts about one's parents.
- He/she is a "no hoper". It is useless trying to help them.
- Someone is always hostile to me – seeing this person as an enemy.

Ideological thoughts:

- You cannot trust the Jews.
- Black people are all dishonest.

### Renewal of the Mind

Fighting negative and destructive thoughts is a daily form of spiritual battle. When we let these thoughts remain and we accept them, they have very negative effects. Renewal of the mind is the long-term task. Renewal of the mind is the same as "putting on the mind of Christ". It means replacing the thinking of the world by the thinking of the Kingdom of God. This happens above all through our being formed and rooted in the Word of God. So the most assured way to ensure that our minds are being renewed is to read and study the Scriptures. This requires time. If we are tuned into the world for 90 hours a week and we have 7 to 10 minutes exposure to the Word, there is no way we can be thinking in a Kingdom way. "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." (Col. 3: 9 – 10).

Notice the link with discernment in Rom. 12: 2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will." The renewed mind of the Christian is the foundation for all spiritual discernment.

### The Key Role of Defensive Weapons

The apostle Paul wrote about our spiritual armour and the weapons with which the Lord equips the believer. "Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." (Eph. 6: 11). The "full armour of God" then includes "the belt of truth ... the breastplate of righteousness ... the shield of faith ... the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6: 14 – 17). The only aggressive weapon mentioned is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." But this sword is not a collection of bible texts with which to bash people over the head, but the deep knowledge of the Word and the spiritual understanding that results. It is

again a question of knowledge, of deeply spiritual knowledge imparted by the Holy Spirit. In other words the sword of the Spirit links up with the belt of truth. The other weapons mentioned are basically defensive or forms of protection: the breastplate of righteousness, for when we are right and pure before the Lord, the enemy cannot touch us; the shield of faith “with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” (Eph. 6: 16). Here the flaming arrows are the lies sown by the evil one. When we believe and stand on God’s Word, then the flaming arrows just hit the shield and cannot harm us. This is exactly what Jesus did during his temptation in the wilderness: the devil attacks Jesus three times with lies and distortions, and each time Jesus cites the Torah in reply and takes His stand on the Word of God. The helmet of salvation again connects with knowledge, because people wear helmets to protect their heads: salvation as our helmet means that our helmet-protection is the conviction that we are in Christ, that we are redeemed by his blood, that we have a secure place in Christ. (Not the same as “Once saved, always saved”).

Another weapon is “praying in the Spirit”. “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.” (Eph. 6: 18).

### Paul’s Emphasis on Standing

Notice how often in Ephesians 6, Paul speaks of standing:

“Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your **stand** (*stenai*) against the devil’s schemes.” (Eph. 6: 11).

“Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to **stand** (*antistenai*) your ground.” (Eph. 6: 13).

“**Stand** (*stete*) firm, then, ...” (Eph. 6: 14).

See too the intercession of Epaphras for the Church in Colossae commended by Paul: “He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may **stand** firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.” (Col. 4: 12).

This emphasis is linked to the teaching of Jesus at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, where he contrasts the house built on rock from the house built of sand. When “the rain came down, the stream rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house”, the house built on rock stood, while the house built on sand fell down (Matt. 7: 25, 27). In this perspective, it is the grounding of our lives and our thinking on the Gospel (“everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice” Matt. 7: 24) that enables us to stand when the storms come, as they inevitably will. But in Ephesians, the word “stand” adds a further dimension: it is what we have to do ourselves, when the storms come. We have to stand on God’s truth, stand on the Word, repudiating all the lies of Satan. When we do that we will stand, and will still be standing when the storm has passed, as it always does.

This passage in Ephesians 6 is the one that mentions the oft-cited verse: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph. 6: 12). This could give the impression that we as Christians are all supposed to launch out on a great crusade to fight the powers of darkness. I think this is a dangerous mistake. Some people are called to undertake particular missions against

strongholds of the enemy – not to be understood as people, but as strongholds of lies and hatred. But it is dangerous to try and enlist Christians in general into “attacks on the enemy”. We have seen how the focus in Ephesians is on repulsing attacks on us by the enemy, not on marching out to attack him.

This is where there is a corporate dimension to renewal of the mind and to the spiritual battle. In recent years charismatic Christians – mostly from the free churches – have led the way in pioneering prayer walks and prayer journeys in repentance for sins of the past that have produced major blockages to the work of evangelization. The most important Catholic contribution here has been the teaching of John Paul II on “the purification of memories”. For there are corporate memories as well as personal individual memories: family memories, tribal memories, national memories, church memories. The purification of memories is the identification, confessing and repudiation of the lies in our corporate memories:

- biased and one-sided histories of past conflicts, e.g. between Hungary and Slovakia, between Catholics and Protestants, between Christians and Jews;
- all irrational prejudices against other peoples, nations, races, religions;
- all forms of group hatred and suspicion (against Jews, Roma, black people, etc.).

There are people praying for revival in Slovakia, revival in Bratislava, etc. Here there is an important work of research in discovering (1) what actually happened in the past; (2) what major evils were committed in this area or place. There are important questions here about what is called identificational repentance, or representative confession; and the difference between private and public initiatives. For you, it is first a question whether you as communities are called to this form of confession of the sins of the past. Private means you are only concerned with spiritual transactions that have effects in the spiritual realm. Here publicizing what you do is a serious mistake.