

## **Fight the Good Fight**

When St. Paul urged young Timothy to fight the good fight (1 Timothy 6:12), he was not primarily talking about battles in congregations or with obstinate members or even with the powers of the world around us. Not that there would not be battles of this kind. There were and there are. No congregation is without its conflicts and no parish is without those who resist the voice of Scripture and no church is without those difficult members who make it harder to love your brother than to love your enemy. Of course, these battles were and are and will continue to afflict the church until Christ comes again in His glory. But the fight St. Paul refers to is personal. The good fight is that which takes place within you. St. Paul knows this only too well. He was a persecutor of the Church before he was ever an apostle to the Gentiles. He held the coats of the people in whom he had aroused the tempting scent of murder. He was still a difficult person to get along with. Ask only Silas, Barnabas, Luke, and, yes, Timothy. They all felt the barbs of St. Paul's words and actions when something went wrong. St. Paul daily fought against the powers of anger and discontent and pride and arrogance. Some days, he lost that fight and the power of ego lived larger in him than the power of Christ.

We would like to believe that our pastors are like Nathanael or Bartholomew – people of such single-minded hearts that it could be said of us as it was of him that there was no guile of deceit in him. We would like to believe that our pastors are holy all the time, that they wear this holiness like the rest of us wear clothing. We would like to believe that temptation is easy for the men of cloth – perhaps we want to believe this because we find it so hard to resist the advances of the devil, the deceitful words of evil, and the tempting, well-worn paths of sin. Just maybe if our pastor has learned not to have such a problem with sin, we too may learn how to be holy.

Pastors would like to believe the same thing. They would like to believe that for the pastor marriage and family are not difficult relationships, that for the pastor there is never any temptation to want or steal or lash out in anger or speak lies instead of truth or lust in the shadows of the heart while appearing so decent on the outside. Pastors would love to think that sin was no longer a problem, that they had dealt with the dark side enough to know how to resist and fight off its influence. But every day proves that every pastor is a sinner like every Christian.

The faith is a fight. The life of the faithful is a fight. It is not a lost cause. No, we do not fight with human weapons but with the whole armour of God (Ephesians 6:10). With the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the feet shod with peace, the shield of faith held up with the hand, the helmet of salvation to guard the mind, and the sword of the Spirit to wield against our enemies, we fight. Even when the enemy is within us, we fight with the same weapons and are guarded by the same armour.

Yes, we fight, but no, we do not fight alone. Christ is fighting in us and through us the great enemies of the faith that capture our hearts with that which has no value and deceive us from the true treasure with cheap trinkets of the moment. Christ is fighting in us and through us those who whine and moan and complain about how hard it is to live by faith and how difficult it is to resist temptation.

Christ is fighting in us and through us the complacency that would put off the things of God and the laziness that would surrender every virtue every time it seemed that we may have to work to keep what God freely gave.

As pastors and people, St. Paul bids us fight – waging war against the old Adam and its voice of defeat and against the world and the devil working all around us to steal our hearts away from God. But fight is what we do. With weapons of the Spirit we fight against haughty pride and learn humility.

With the training of the Spirit we fight against the sins that stain our consciences and confess them to the Lord. With the wisdom of the Spirit we fight against the rush to judge or speak and learn to put the best construction on everything. With the vision of the Spirit we fight against the disappointment of eyes that see only wrong and learn to see with the eyes of faith the promises of God that will not let us down. With the truth of the Spirit we fight against hearts that know the cost of everything but the value of nothing, especially life given by God. With the heart of the Spirit we fight against in the safe space in which the hurts of others are theirs and never ours – unlike the mercy of God which bore the weight of sins and sorrows which were never God's but are always ours.

Though devils all the world should fill and hearts too quickly surrender to the old Adam and his ways, we shall not give in and we shall not give up. None other than Christ Himself fights for us. Every day He works to reclaim us as His own people and restore us by the power of His grace. Every day He speaks with the voice of His Word to make us wise unto salvation and every day He washes us with the once and forever baptismal water.

There is no rest for us but only the battle for our lives that takes place in us every bit as much as it takes place outside of us in the world. But do not lose heart, we fight as victors to keep what Christ has won.

Do not lose heart, the devil and our own sinful flesh and the world around us cannot win without our own surrender of the good and precious mercy that first made us Christ's own and still keeps us as His own. That was the comfort to St. Timothy. That is the comfort of those who hear the Word and receive its sacramental grace in water, bread, and wine. It is a fight, but we do not fight alone. It is a fight against enemies outside of us but they are already defeated. It is a fight inside our hearts and minds but the Spirit is working to transform our minds and make our hearts His temple. It is a fight, but it is the good fight of the redeemed to lay hold of the redemption which is ours in Christ Jesus.