

## THE STRUGGLE FOR HEAVEN

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence; I ask your pardon for my sins, and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

Our topic is perfect for this time of the year. The title of this meditation is “Interior Struggle,” also known as ascetical struggle. That term “ascetical struggle” might not be all that familiar because it is not used very often. And yet, it is really, really important, because we are involved in *ascesis*, a very strange Latin word that ultimately means going higher and higher; doing whatever it takes to aim high, and to reach Heaven.

The fact that we combine these two words, “ascetical” and “struggle,” well, it indicates the fact that in order to not only aim high, but get there, there has to be struggle. Warfare. We have to wage an ongoing battle against the enemies of our sanctity, against our pride, laziness, love of comfort, sensuality and a whole host of others. It's so important as we begin this new season, to put our struggle within its biggest context, and that is to take Heaven by storm. The whole point of spending this time of prayer, of pursuing our Christian vocation, *is to take Heaven by storm*.

You undoubtedly do not remember something that St. John Paul II said in- he was giving a talk to some young people. This is many years ago, the early 80s. And he referred to that very mysterious phrase from the Gospel: “The violent bear it away.” You say, “What does that mean?” *The Violent Bear it Away* happens to be a phrase or title of a great novel by Flannery O'Connor. But what the Pope went on to say was, “It is the violent in the sense of doing violence against ourselves.” In other words, waging warfare. Those who do that “bear it away.” They take the prize.

This is what St. Paul was getting at in his Letter to the Corinthians when he said, “Do you not know that in a race, all the runners compete but only one runner receives the prize? So run that you may obtain that prize. Every athlete,” St. Paul continues, “every athlete who's serious exercises self-control in all things.”

We know people who are pursuing the Olympics, pursuing something, you know, very- performing at a very high level, they follow a very strict diet, a very strict training schedule, a lot of sacrifice. They get up at four in the morning, and the list goes on and on. Well, Paul says they do that to receive a perishable crown but we, an imperishable crown: “I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body, I keep it under control; lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified.”

He's talking about interior struggle in a very powerful, very graphic way. How helpful it is for us as we look forward to this coming season, just projecting out over the coming months, to realize this is the name of the game: “The violent bear it away.” Not those who say, “Well, I will get around to doing my

work tomorrow or eventually, but in the meantime, can you pass me another cream puff?" I mean they will never- they're not going to take anything. They will not bear away anything.

This notion of interior struggle is a perennial topic of the spiritual life from the very beginning. *Why* is it so necessary? Well, St. Augustine, way back in the fourth century, a long time ago, he said, "The moment you say, 'that's it, that's enough. I have reached cruising altitude. Pass me another creampuff,' your lost." Why? Because the minute we say, "That's it. I have reached the heights of sanctity. I no longer have to struggle," we immediately start dropping back to our default settings of love of comfort, of laziness, of dissipation.

People who have taken on, inflicted, upon themselves a serious diet, well, they can tell all sorts of stories about this. They finally- they follow their diet for a few hours, then they have a big success. And then comes that instinct to celebrate their big success by going back to what- eating what they should have- what they- *defeat*.

We have prayed so often before about this great book, the first book, by St. Josemaria called *The Way*, where he says, "If you do not deny yourself, you will never be a soul of prayer." He's getting at a very simple truth that our Christian life is not compatible with self-satisfied mediocrity, love of comfort, and lukewarmness.

Now, we're throwing out here some very interesting, very important words such as "dissipation" and "lukewarmness." We'll get to them with a little bit- in a little bit more detail in a few minutes. But for now, suffice it to say, as we talk to Our Lord about this, Christian life is not compatible with mediocrity, with going at half-speed, love of comfort, and lukewarmness. St. Teresa of Avila, we're going back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, she says, "To suppose that Jesus would admit to his close friendship pleasure-loving peoples who want to be free from all trials is ridiculous."

Now, Teresa does not mince words, to say the least. "To suppose that he would admit to his close friendship pleasure-loving people who want to be free from all trials is ridiculous." What we're talking about here is having such a desire to reach Heaven, to take Heaven by storm, that we will be ready for anything, which is to be much more down to Earth, *we will be ready and willing for that daily struggle*. A struggle that has to be positive, cheerful, constant, carried out with a sporting spirit. With a spirit of energetic contest.

I mean, just think of St. Paul talking about running in order to get the crown. Think of St. Paul at that moment where he came up against so many difficulties, such as that incredible moment when he is taken out, stoned, left for dead. If we use our imagination just a little bit, we realize anybody else in that situation- well, first of all, we can't even- we can't imagine it.

Someone who has been stoned and left for dead is not going to have the reaction that St. Paul had because St. Paul got up, helped by his disciples, dusted himself off and kept going. It's unbelievable. Which brings us to a very important point about resilience, about never giving up because ascetical struggle involves never ever, ever, ever giving up. On the contrary. You may have come across that very interesting thought that's a little bit more recent than St. Paul. It's Michael Jordan, who's probably, arguably, the greatest basketball player ever.

Well, he says, "I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and I missed. I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." I mean someone like Michael Jordan shared the same fire coming out of his eyes that St. Paul had. And St. Teresa of Avila and St. Josemaria and all the great saints. They had fire coming out their eyes. It's something really great for us to ask, right now, during our time of prayer as we look out over these coming months. We say to the Holy Spirit, "I want- I want *your fire* coming out my eyes."

But that brings- it brings up a very important point. How do we go about- how do we do this? We mentioned earlier this really interesting, very important enemy: dissipation. Dissipation is deadly. And one way to get- to wrap our head around it, so to speak, is to go back to something we've prayed about before, which is those five months during the Spanish Civil War in Madrid when St. Josemaria and a few others found themselves- they found refuge in the Consulate of Honduras. They're in Madrid.

And so, they were in that little room from day to day, not knowing when they would be able to leave. They didn't know if it would be the next day, the next month, and they were like that for five months. Sharing that building with a lot of other people, almost 100 people. Inside that room, there was an atmosphere of fervor, of ascetical struggle. Outside that room, an awful lot of dissipation.

And what was the difference? Outside the room, all those other dozens and dozens of people, they spent the whole day complaining, moaning, and groaning in despair, despondency, and ultimately not doing anything, which- which is deadly for the soul. Inside that room, St. Josemaria said, with a great deal of joy and of optimism and faith, "*Here's the schedule*. Here's how we're going to do each- what we're going to do each day, how we're going to make use of this time."

They had a schedule for all the different aspects, the elements of their plan of life, their prayer life. They had a plan; each one had a small job, had a plan for their study, they had a target, a goal. For example, St. Josemaria said to the others: "Okay, you, Alvaro, you study Japanese. You, the other one, you study German. Somebody else studies English because as soon as we get out of here, as soon as the war is over, we continue the expansion of Opus Dei."

And so, he was looking way beyond the confines of the- of those, those four walls. And he did so with such joy and such fire in his eyes, that they had a blast, which is hard to believe, but they, those who were there said later there was- they didn't want to leave, they *did not want to leave*. We need the discipline of a plan of our work, good use of time, those small sacrifices that keep us from falling into dissipation, the sacrifices that keep us exercising control over our appetites.

In previous meditations, we've referred to this really important program called Optimal Work. It comes to mind in this context, because it has everything to do with working at one's best, with fire in your belly, to use an inelegant phrase. Well, Optimal Work talks about the importance of discipline, of having a schedule, getting up on the dot, at a set time. It talks a lot about setting a time for that *one hour of work*, no distractions whatsoever, and really pushing hard. And interestingly, it has a lot to do with our topic.

There was a radio interview recently with the founder of Optimal Work, whose name is Dr. Kevin Majeres. The topic was, Doctor - I should say that Dr. Majeres is a psychiatrist in Boston. The question

was, “What do you- how do you help your patients who are anxious when they have to give a presentation, they have a job interview, anything like that? If they're anxious before an exam, what do you say to them?”

And then the interviewer waits, as you can imagine, expecting something like, “Well, it's okay. It'll be okay.” But the answer was, “I tell my patients three words: *Bring. It. On.*” And the interviewer was quite surprised: “Bring it on?”

“Yeah. It's very important. What I'm saying to my patients is, ‘you have to advance towards that challenging situation, whatever it is - presentation, exam - you have to advance towards it with eagerness. Bring it on. Let's go.’ Because that kind of attitude unleashes all sorts of adrenaline in the brain. It opens up brain circuits. And it allows you to function really well. Optimally.”

“Whereas if someone approaches that presentation, the exam, without any kind of nervousness whatsoever, that person is going to be flat. Without fire.” Well, that's interesting. We look ahead towards these- these weeks waiting for us. And we say to the Lord right now, “Bring it on. I have no idea what's going to happen. But the last thing I want to do is approach this coming semester with anxiety, with anxiousness, with doubt. And so, I say, “Bring it on. Let's go.”

One enemy is dissipation. A more serious enemy is lukewarmness because lukewarmness is a disease of the will. Lukewarmness is expressed by this attitude: *Whatever. I don't care. It doesn't matter. The small things don't matter. It doesn't matter what time I get up.* For students: *Doesn't matter if I skip this class. It just- you know, very little matters. Doesn't matter if my assignment is turned in late, doesn't matter whether I actually go to Mass on Sunday or not.*

If that ever happens, we have to react with great energy, because lukewarmness is the beginning of the end, if we can be dramatic. Someone who is drifting into lukewarmness- just, we don't want to go there. Let's just put it that way. It is *bad*. Well, how do we avoid lukewarmness? How do we avoid dissipation? It is of the utmost importance to maintain that *ascesis*, going back to that really weird Latin word with which we began. *Struggle*.

Why is it that the Lord said to us, “Enter by the narrow gate?” Because he wanted to say to us, “*Fight! Struggle.*” How do we go about maintaining *ascesis*? How do we go about keeping up this struggle? This climb towards sanctity? Well, for example, a schedule. Even- even when we're, I don't know, the weekend, we can't just abandon everything because abandoning, letting go, giving up, is- it's just drifting back. And who wants to drift back?

It doesn't mean we have to get up at the crack of dawn on Saturday or Sunday morning. But it does mean really and truly wanting to make use of our time, *good* use of our time. And we can never forget, as St. Josemaria often reminded us, our time is a *treasure*. Every single hour of our life is a treasure. Those hours on Sunday morning are of equal *treasuredness*, not a real word, equally valuable. And for students, those- those hours during the first weeks of the semester, are of equal value to those hours leading up to the final exam.

Success lies in realizing, “I have to make use, exquisite use, of every hour.” One of the most important allies we have to avoid dissipation and to avoid lukewarmness is the Sacrament of Penance, Confession. Confession is our chance to say to the Lord, “My Jesus, I *do* care about these things. I care about the small

things; I care about the big things.” It is our way of- of getting on our knees and saying, “Forgive me. Help me more. Give me your grace, so that I can continue this struggle.”

One of the great aspects of our interior struggle, one of the great elements, is precisely atonement, *contrition*. I mean just think, making acts of contrition are our way of saying, “I do care.” Right now, we can renew our determination to go to Confession often, to pay attention to those small things.

Well, one final point: It has a lot to do with one of the fruits of interior struggle. To the extent that we really and truly struggle, we fight, we become that much more aware of those around us and *their needs*. Someone who does not struggle, immersed in dissipation or even worse, lukewarmness, is oblivious to anybody's needs, but rather is totally focused on themselves.

Just recently, I came across a description of a book. I know nothing about the book. I don't know who wrote it. The title is, *It's Not About You: A Brief Guide*. But all I- all I came across was a tiny little blog entry that I think is taken from the book, is very helpful. Where it says, “Life is not about you. It is about what you do for others. The faster you are able to get over yourself, the more you can do for the people who matter most. Yet external forces keep pulling you toward self-centered pursuits. From books pushing happiness, to advertisements convincing you that consumption leads to adoration, these messages tempt you to focus inward. That is all a trap.”

Well, it's a great point. “The faster we are able to get over ourselves, the more we can do for people who matter most.” Well, that too can be a great guidepost. The right goal for these coming weeks of the- of the new season. And for that we turn to Our Lady, as we always do. We say, “My Mother, lead me in this battle because *this is warfare*. Never, ever, let me let up in my struggle to become more and more like you, more and more like your Son. Obtain from your spouse, the Holy Spirit, all the graces that I need in order to really and truly come to resemble your Son, Jesus Christ.

I thank you, my God for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations that you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



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