



October 25, 2022

## A SERIES ON SPIRITUAL LIFE

### The struggle against the flesh

In the framework of this series on the spiritual life, it is also necessary to speak about the "3 enemies of the soul", which stand in the way of our following Christ and against which we must consciously fight.

At the beginning of this series we spoke about the virtues, emphasizing the importance of acquiring them. Indeed, they constitute a powerful antidote against all enemy attacks, but especially against the inclinations of our flesh and the tendency to give ourselves inordinately to its passions.

After the fall into sin, our human nature was inclined to evil. We need to be aware of this, so that we do not become blind to our condition. A realistic appreciation of ourselves-that is, true self-knowledge-will help us not to form an idealistic image of ourselves or of others. It is important to clarify that realism does not mean surrendering to a pessimistic vision. Rather, it induces us to be vigilant, so that we neither overestimate nor underestimate the evil that dwells within us.

Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we must fight with perseverance against that tendency to give in to our disordered impulses. In the context of the cardinal virtues, we had spoken about temperance, which helps us to restrain our carnal appetites so as not to allow ourselves to be dominated by them.

This consideration brings us to the essential point: all our inner impulses and passions - as well as the external acts to which they induce us - must be under the dominion of the spirit, so that we do not allow ourselves to be subjugated by them. This is the meaning of ascetical practices.

In Sacred Scripture, St. Paul describes to us in detail what the works of the flesh are: *"sexual vice, impurity, and sensuality, the worship of false gods and sorcery; antagonisms and rivalry, jealousy, bad temper and quarrels, disagreements, factions and malice, drunkenness, orgies and all such things"* (Gal 5:19-21).

We must come to understand that any restraint we consciously impose on ourselves, in order to attain or defend freedom from the "demands of the flesh," strengthens us for our whole path of discipleship in general.

Perhaps in former times too rigorous an asceticism was practiced here and there. There can always be excesses! In this case, there is a danger of coercing human nature too much, instead of forming it under the dominion of the spirit. But today we must rather regret that we are losing the sense to apply even the most minimal demands of a profitable and also necessary asceticism. Let us think, for example, of fasting, which is now hardly a part of the life of the Catholic Church. In general, few people consider renunciation and the restraint of cravings as essential for spiritual combat. But this is indeed the case!

Jesus redeemed us from sins by his Passion and Death, nailing them to the Cross! Now it is up to us to cooperate with this grace, to lead a life according to the Spirit of God and to overcome the "works of the flesh" in us.

This may be a long process, but we will achieve it by God's grace. We may suffer defeats, but the Lord, by forgiving us our sins, has already granted us the remedy.

Therefore, we must consciously take up the fight and counteract all those tendencies in us that want to turn us away from God. This requires perseverance. We may discover within ourselves evil inclinations that are deeply rooted and have become entrenched in our lives through habit.

However, we must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by them or give up the fight. In this context, we might be helped by the wonderful phrase uttered by St. Joan of Arc when she was asked why she would need soldiers, seeing as how it was God who sent her to fight: "The soldiers will fight and God will give the victory."

So it is with us. Our part is to fight against our evil inclinations, but in the end it will be God who grants the victory. Cooperating with God's grace, we are to actualize in our lives the triumph that Christ obtained for us on the Cross, nailing to it the "works of our flesh."