

27. October 2023

The fight against the flesh

Rom 7:18-25

'And really, I know of nothing good living in me - in my natural self, that is - for though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not: the good thing I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not want - that is what I do. But every time I do what I do not want to, then it is not myself acting, but the sin that lives in me. So I find this rule: that for me, where I want to do nothing but good, evil is close at my side. In my inmost self I dearly love God's law, but I see that acting on my body there is a different law which battles against the law in my mind. So I am brought to be a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? God - thanks be to him - through Jesus Christ our Lord. So it is that I myself with my mind obey the law of God, but in my disordered nature I obey the law of sin.'

In this passage, St. Paul describes the struggle against our own flesh, or, in other words, the struggle against our evil inclinations.

The teachers of the spiritual life teach us that there are three enemies we face on the path of following Christ. On the one hand, there is the struggle against the Devil; secondly, the struggle not to be overcome by the lure and seductions of the world; and finally, the struggle against the flesh, that is, the struggle against our disordered appetites, both spiritual and bodily.

Perhaps it can be said that this last fight is the most difficult, because we are constantly confronted with our own flesh. St. Paul describes it very clearly: reason is not strong enough to resist the seductions of sin. This is a consequence of original sin, the effects of which have been further aggravated by personal sins.

It is necessary to know this deplorable "inventory" which has been left to us as an inheritance, so that we do not make an erroneous estimate of man's situation on the basis of the supposed goodness of his nature.

We must have the realistic vision provided by the authentic teaching of the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 385-412). Our will has been weakened, but not completely annihilated. Therefore, with God's grace, we can set out to counteract the

negative inclinations of our fallen nature. It is necessary to fight this fight, to somehow regain the integrity of our person and to take back the dominion over ourselves, evidently under the dominion of God.

This battle is what spiritual teachers call "asceticism". The Apostle to the Gentiles has made it clear to us that it is Our Lord Jesus Christ who can save us from this sinful condition. Only in Him and through His help can we permanently counteract our evil inclinations; only through Him can we fight this battle, without giving up after having suffered defeats.

In the first place, we should look at our carnal inclinations, or, in other words, the disordered passions. Unbridled anger leads to the sin of injustice; disordered sexual desire is destructive; an excessive appetite for food can lead to gluttony; laziness prevents us from doing good; greed binds a person to himself and restricts his capacity to love, and so on.

There are also other inclinations in us, which the Lord clearly mentions, teaching us that all evil comes from the heart of man (cf. Mt 15:19).

To seriously take up the fight against all these inclinations requires a fundamental decision. We must be willing to know ourselves, being honest in confronting the evil within us and willing to acknowledge it.

Not a few people are afraid to see themselves in the light of God. They are so afraid of what they might find inside themselves that they forget that they are before a loving Father, who wants to help them unfold the image of God that they carry within themselves. That is why they prefer to close their eyes to their evil inclinations, and therefore do not fight them resolutely with God's help either. But this attitude will have negative effects and may even have repercussions on their religiosity, making it artificial and less authentic, because they tend to want to see only their positive sides, while repressing the negative ones.

It is good to face reality! *"The Lord trains those he loves, and chastises every son he accepts"* - Holy Scripture tells us (Heb 12:6). So it is God's love that wants us, with His help, to fight against our evil inclinations and to try to put virtues into practice. If, for example, I am inclined to excessive anger, I cannot simply let myself be carried away by this passion, but I must try to control it with God's help. If anger flares up in me, I must not justify it, as is unfortunately often the case; but I must begin to pray inwardly, thus restraining this disordered passion.

We should keep in mind these words of Scripture: *"God's saving justice is never served by*

human anger" (Jas 1:20). Moreover, we must ask the Lord to make us meek and, for our part, strive to acquire this virtue.

What we have said in this example about anger can be applied to all other disordered passions, such as, for example, to restrain disordered sexuality and, at the same time, to strive for the virtue of chastity. It will be a long struggle, but in this way we will be able to prove our faithfulness to the Lord.