

SPIRITUAL COMBAT AND DISCERNMENT

In the final chapter of his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad), Pope Francis cautions us that “Christian life is a constant battle.” (# 158) We are in contention with the world, with our human weaknesses, and with the devil, the prince of evil. We need to have a supernatural understanding of life, beyond empirical standards, to acknowledge the reality and power of the devil, “the evil one” from whom we ask the Father to deliver us in the Lord’s Prayer. Don’t think of the devil as merely a representation or symbol or the idea of evil, lest you let down your guard and become more vulnerable. “The devil does not need to possess us. He poisons us with the venom of hatred, desolation, envy and vice.” (# 161)

The Lord gives us many weapons in our fight against evil, including the sacraments, Scripture, and the grace to live out the Gospels’ calls to charity and evangelization. “The cultivation of all that is good, progress in the spiritual life and growth in love are the best counterbalance to evil.” (# 163) Pope Francis further warns against becoming lethargic or lukewarm in our spiritual life, lest we become spiritually corrupt, blinded to the reality of evil in our lives. (#s 164-165)

We must pray for the gift of discernment, which enables us to distinguish between that which comes from the Holy Spirit and that which stems from the spirit of the world or the devil. We need to receive this gift, then “develop it through prayer, reflection, reading and good counsel.” (# 166) Discernment is not just for extraordinary times, but is needed daily so that we can grow beyond good intentions to true holiness. It transcends our insights from the human sciences to seek a glimpse of God’s plan for us, to truly come to know the Father and the one he has sent, and so share his eternal life. (#170)

While we need to hear God’s message coming to us through the events and people in our lives, we also need the silence of prolonged prayer to sort things out and “see the whole of our existence afresh in his own light.” (# 171) “Prayerful discernment must be born of a readiness to listen: to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself.” (#172)

We need to seek what salvation means in today’s life circumstances. “Discernment is not about discovering what more we can get out of this life, but about recognizing how we can better accomplish the mission entrusted to us at our baptism. This entails a readiness to make sacrifices, even to sacrificing everything.” (#174) Our logic is that of the cross – we suffer to achieve happiness, we die to live forever. “God asks everything of us, yet he also gives everything to us. He does not want to enter our lives to cripple or diminish them, but to bring them to fulfillment.” Discernment is “an authentic process of leaving ourselves behind in order to approach the mystery of God.” (#175)

The Holy Father ends with the reminder that “Mary lived the Beatitudes as none other, the saint among saints (who) teaches us the way of holiness. (She) doesn’t need a flood of words ... All we need to do is whisper, time and time again: ‘Hail Mary...’” (# 176)