

## **On Spiritual Struggle**

*By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (Matt. 11:12).

The meaning of this is that you do not enter the kingdom of heaven easily but through toil, work and exertion. You struggle in your studies in order to succeed and to obtain the diploma you desire. You struggle and sacrifice in order to build a cohesive family. And you struggle and fight to be victorious in the kingdom of heaven and to be worthy to be called a child of God. Struggle is a fundamental issue for the believer.

In Christianity, the struggle is spiritual. Its field is the heart, and its weapons are faith, the word of God, and love for God and humankind. It is resistance against the forces of evil that are arrayed against us to make us evil. It is guarding the self from deviating towards anything that would make us prisoners to self-love. It is orienting our inner forces toward the love of God and humankind. The Christian struggles in order to cut off evil from within, not from others. So long as we have not triumphed over the evil that is within us, we will not be able to contribute to weakening it outside of ourselves. Just as evil spreads forces of evil in its surroundings, so also does good spread forces of good. Therefore, true cleansing is the cleansing of the self. From what? From every evil, malice, hypocrisy, pride, hatred, stinginess, selfishness, etc. “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies,” says our Lord in the Gospel (Matt. 15:19).

Entering the kingdom of heaven requires the faithful to struggle. It is not a matter of personal choice but rather a duty imposed by the need to resist the spiritual forces of evil dispersed throughout the world. The assault of these forces places us before two options: either we surrender to them and in turn become evil; or we resist them, relying on God’s grace which strengthens us, saying with the Apostle Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). The

struggle intended here is resistance to these forces, starting with myself and within my own soul.

The forces of evil attack us two ways: from the inside and from the outside.

They attack us from the inside by stirring up our inward inclinations toward committing sin. They incite our inner forces to move contrary to what they were created to do. The emotion of anger, which is necessary for combatting evil, becomes an emotion directed against someone else who annoys me or who provokes my jealousy or antipathy. The evil one mobilizes inner forces and the outward means that incite them. A pornographic image may provoke thoughts of fornication in the mind, which are reflected in the nervous system. It stirs the body to seek to realize its lust. The presence of delicious food might provoke my desire to eat it or to over-indulge in it beyond the capacity of my stomach, despite my being full. In this way, successive assaults by the evil one use the senses to pressure the human soul to sin.

Outward spiritual warfare, on the other hand, takes place through adversities, hardships, persecution, problems, obstacles and the like. Attacks come from the outside in order to prevent the believer from living his faith. Some of these attacks are open and some are hidden. The hidden ones are greater because they are more dangerous.

When I am subject to direct pressure to deny my faith or to commit an obvious sin, I know that I am confronted with evil forces that want to push me along the path of transgression. It is easy for me to reject them and not to respond to their urging. If I fall, I know that I have sinned and I need true repentance. But the hidden warfare is more difficult because the believer is subjected to a danger that he does not realize and does not sense. He follows it without knowing that he is sinning. The danger of these sorts of attacks has grown in our current age.

Various ideas, different lifestyles, and compromise with the world stream in from every direction. The words for vices change. Lying, for example, becomes “slyness”; hypocrisy becomes “politeness”; bad faith becomes “wisdom”; fornication becomes “the body’s needs”; and libertinism becomes “freedom.” Concepts are

inverted and values are overthrown. The humble person becomes someone with a weak personality; the chaste person, someone unnatural; the thrifty, a miser; and the miser, conscientious. There are countless, innumerable examples of this.

Our spiritual fathers speak of demonic warfare from the left side—that is, in secret or indirect. We are led along by this or cooperate with it without knowing. This is what our friends call “unknowing sins.” The reason for them in most cases is spiritual ignorance. A pharmacist, a committed believer, once asked me after a discussion about abortion, “What should I do to erase my many sins of helping those who asked for my assistance to abort and happily agreeing to their request, thinking that I was performing a good service?”

Knowledge of the self alone preserves us in upright struggle and provides us with the humility that brings down God’s grace, which, in turn, strengthens us and gives us victory over all the temptations of the evil one.

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