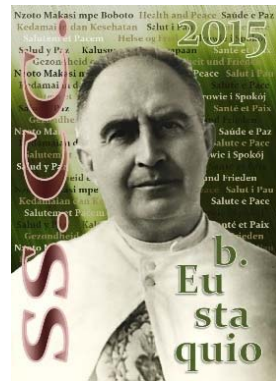


The Combat of Faith

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The allegory of the snake: evil and oppression.
A relief in wood, Parish in Inhaminga (Mozambique)

"I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky," (Lk 10:18) says Jesus when his joyful disciples return, after sending them ahead of him. Here, as in other places, the New Testament speaks of an "enemy" that must be overcome. The enemy is powerful, "the prince of this world" (Jn 12:31), who with "the lifting up of Jesus," his death and resurrection, will be overcome and cast out. Jesus is the "one stronger than he" who "attacks and overcomes him." (Lk 11:22)

According to this way of speaking, **Jesus'** saving work is understood as combat. "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Cor. 15:25-26) This combat spans the life of Jesus. His whole life is marked by the conflict that will lead to his being condemned to death. This combat continues in Jesus' disciples, who are called to fight, "the good fight of faith." (1 Tim. 6:12) The combat culminates in the eschatological struggle described symbolically in Revelation as the confrontation of Michael and his angels against "the huge dragon, the ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan" who is finally overcome: "For the accuser of our brothers is cast out, who accuses them before our God day and night." (Rev. 12:10)

Many spiritual traditions in the Church have used **the image of spiritual combat** to speak of the mystery of faith and the Christian life. However in our day, we don't generally hear this kind of language. Many do not like it. On the one hand, placing emphasis on the struggle against temptation and self-deception can prove psychologically damaging, leading to a scrupulous conscience and morality focused on blame. On the other hand, the image of "combat" comes right out of the context of war, where there are "good and bad." It could be used to justify violence exercised in the name of religious belief: the violence -verbal or physical- of fundamentalists. In this way

of thinking, a good believer is one who would be ready to fight against the enemies of the faith, even to the point of eliminating them if necessary. Unfortunately, the world is riddled with crime, violence and genocide carried out in the name of faith. Religious persecution is a daily drama. We are living in an age in history that has produced more martyrs than any other.

As a result many prefer a way of speaking they consider more positive and less aggressive, one which expresses faith as a source of life, growth, harmony, humanization and personal fulfillment. This language of life, so used in the little world of religious life, certainly has a biblical foundation (such as the frequently quoted John 10:10, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly") and reveals very beautiful aspects of faith. However such language runs the risk of being naïve and ineffective, if not complemented by the metaphor of "combat." The idea of "combat" helps us open our eyes to the evil within us and in everyone and prepares us to courageously face the conflict that is always part of the struggle for good. For evil exists. One would have to be rather blind not to see it. And the tempter is always awake and at work. "Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) The good will always have to be a victory.

Christian combat is not that of the jihadist who, weapon in hand, sets out to destroy his enemies. In Christian combat, the enemy is not evil people but rather the evil that motivates them. Jesus confronted the demons without doing damage to the possessed person. "For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness..." (Eph 6:12) It is a struggle against spiritual forces, accomplished with "the arms of God."

"Deliver us from evil", we pray in the Our Father. That evil, the evil one, is what must be overcome. As the serpent in Genesis (Gn 3:1-5), **the evil one deceives**, making us believe that we are good even when we do evil. As the serpent in Exodus (Num 21:6), **the evil one does harm**. He leaves his mark- pain, suffering, hatred and anguish. Evil is the opposite of love.

Some cultures have no difficulty in recognizing the existence of evil spirits. Other cultures, more rationalist and materialist, find it difficult to accept that such spiritual forces exist that are contrary to the love of God. It is thought that everything is determined by an individual's psychology. Whatever be the case, we cannot understand Jesus and ignore his struggle with what the Gospel of John calls "the world", which is the domain of the prince of darkness: "have courage, I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:33; Cf. also 1 Jn 5:4)

Pope **Francis**, very much in keeping with the Ignatian exercises, frequently makes reference to the struggle against the evil spirit who tries to deceive and do harm. A "spirit of the world" exists and we must put up resistance with the help of grace. If the evil spirit overcomes us, we become worldly and are useless for the combat of Christ.

At the beginning of Lent this year, commenting on the account of Jesus' temptations Francis said, "It is a test from which the Lord comes out victorious and which prepares him to proclaim the Gospel of the Reign of God. During those forty days of solitude, He confronted Satan "hand to hand," he unmasked his temptations and overcame him. And in Him, we have all overcome. However it is up to each of us to protect this victory in our daily life... Lent is a time of struggle against the spirit of evil." (Angelus, February 22, 2015)

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis reminds us that "Christian triumph is always a cross, yet a cross which is at the same time a victorious banner

borne with aggressive tenderness against the assaults of evil." (EG 85) *Aggressive tenderness...*

Blessed **Eustaquio**, with a simple manner and without theological finesse, saw his ministry as combat against the forces of evil. On the one hand, the struggle was a source of personal liberation:

"There are two forces within me: one force drags me down, the other points me to heaven. One force is the demon, the other is God... I have to struggle, a struggle with no truce!"

On the other hand, Eustaquio felt called to struggle against the evil that gave rise to spiritism and the sects, especially among the simpler folk and those who suffered:

"They cry "God!", they write "God!" and there is nothing of God in their heart but only pestilence and poison which, under the false appearance of faith and religion, they want to sew among those whose faith is weak even if not completely absent... And, once the evil spirit has taken possession of their hearts, then they see the havoc and the poison that has now spread... And taking advantage of human misery, they go after the sick creatures who, despairing because of their problems and falsely hoping for a bit of relief, hand themselves over body and soul." (Retreat at Rio Claro, 1941)

Eustaquio's affection for the simple folk, whom he saw manipulated and deceived by people without scruples who took advantage of them, is impressive. It aroused his anger and his desire to fight with the weapons of faith so as to liberate the people.

Evil is deceptive and does harm and so we have to fight it. Our **founders** spoke of the need of "reparation" because the damage caused by evil reaches to the very heart of God. God is pained by the suffering of his daughters and sons. "We have to enter into the interior suffering of the Sacred Heart (of Jesus)." (Circular Letter of the Good Father, April 14, 1817) It is love for the victims of evil that moves us to take up the combat of faith.

The apostle asks us to "resist him, steadfast in faith." (1 Pt. 5:9) We have to resist on at least two fronts. The first is to be attentive to ourselves. Satan is an expert in **deception**. We need the arms of humility and prayer in order to avoid the vanity of thinking ourselves just. The evil one is delighted to affirm our pride concerning things that in fact distance us from the Gospel.

The other front is the suffering of others. Evil does damage and causes suffering. Let us open our eyes more and more to the suffering of our brothers and sisters, especially to the little ones and may we allow ourselves to be affected by it. Authentic **compassion** arouses the desire to struggle. Taking up the weapons of Christian combat, may we have the courage to confront the evil forces that cause that suffering, whether it be injustice, indifference, ignorance, oppression, violence, greed or whatever other form of evil that is opposed to the loving desire of the Father. Even though we undoubtedly will have to pay with our own suffering.

Jesus is risen! Great is his victory!

Happy Easter!

