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Spiritual Combat, Vigilance and Discernment

In this final section of *Gaudete et Exsultate*, we are reminded that the Christian life is not easy, being a battle not only with the world, but also with evil. Much discernment is required.

OPENING PRAYER

Jesus, give me the courage to live out the Christian path of holiness that you are calling me to. I acknowledge that it will not be easy. I pray for strength and perseverance in my journey. I trust that you are with me: send your Spirit to guide me in the way that leads to fullness of life. Give me a discerning heart so that I can follow your will for me in my life. Amen.

CHRISTIAN LIFE IS A BATTLE

There are many battles in attempting to live out an authentic Christian life. We can be deceived when we give in to the world's values and a worldly mentality; and our own human weaknesses pose obstacles as well. However, there is also a real and constant struggle with evil which is present in our midst.

Pope Francis speaks of the reality of the devil, not as just an idea or figure of speech, but rather as a personal being who assails us. If we water this down and let down our guard, then we can be more vulnerable to despair, hatred and other negative practices that can be destructive in our lives.

Thankfully, in this constant struggle, we are given the spiritual tools to persevere and overcome: "faith-filled prayer, meditation on the word of God, the celebration of Mass, Eucharistic adoration, sacramental Reconciliation, works of charity, community life, missionary outreach" (GE, 162).

Jesus rejoices every time we make progress with little victories where we overcome any opposition. These are



the steps towards holiness. We can't be 'neutral' in this endeavour, but should strive to foster goodness and continually grow in love. ***Vigilance is required, so that we don't become complacent and self-satisfied.*** We need to be attentive even to subtle ways that we can be deceived by evil or forms of self-centredness, so that our spiritual life does not get weakened or corrupted.

FOR REFLECTION / DISCUSSION

- Q. How would you describe a 'worldly' mentality compared to God's way?
- Q. How do you understand the role of evil in people's lives or in the world?
- Q. What helps you to stay strong in your spiritual life?
- Q. Can you describe a time when you overcame a negativity in your life? How did you do it?

DISCERNMENT

In order to work out which path to take, we need to be able to discern what comes from the Holy Spirit and what does not. Discernment is more than just common sense, but rather a gift from the Spirit that we should ask for and cultivate through prayer, reflection and guidance.

Discernment is really needed today given the many options presented to us which all seem valid and good. With the prevalence of an online culture, it is easy to become caught up in every passing trend and not be able



to determine what is best for us. With each new element in our life, discernment can help us to hold on to, and move forward, with what is good. We need to examine our desires and anxieties within us, as well as the signs of the times around us, so that we can recognise the paths that will lead us to full freedom in Christ. “Test everything; hold fast to what is good” (1 Thess 5:21).

This discernment is not only needed in extraordinary situations, but all the time. It is the tool that will help us to “recognise God’s timetable” and **be able to hear the promptings of the Spirit** which is always inviting us to grow. Pope Francis points out that “Often discernment is exercised in small and apparently irrelevant things, since greatness of spirit is manifested in simple everyday realities” (*GE*, 169). We should strive for all that is great, but at the same time also focus on each day’s responsibilities and commitments. A daily “examination of conscience” is a worthwhile exercise in this regard, to help us see the workings of the Spirit across our day, and where we moved away from the path of holiness.

We must remember that discernment is a grace, a gift that allows us to tap into the “unique and mysterious” plan that God has for the real purpose of our lives. We have to be open to hearing this. God can reveal this to us in many ways, but it is essential that we make time for silence in prolonged prayer so that we can better hear

and interpret the inspirations we receive from God. We must have a readiness to listen - to the Lord, to others, and to reality itself. Listening allows us to put aside our usual way of seeing things so that we can be **open to the ‘more’ that God is offering us**. This ‘more’ can be challenging, but is always for our benefit. Let’s be open to these disruptive calls.

“In this way, we become truly open to accepting a call that can shatter our security, but lead us to a better life. It is not enough that everything be calm and peaceful. God may be offering us something more, but in our comfortable inadvertence, we do not recognise it” (*GE*, 172).

It is important to remember that we are not discerning what we can get out of life for ourselves, but rather we are discerning how to better live the mission we received at our Baptism - to continue the mission of Jesus of bringing about the Kingdom of God in the world. This involves some sacrifice on our part, and we are reminded that the logic of God that we are following is that of the Cross. This is the dynamic that leads Pope Francis to remind us once again, as he did at the start of *Gaudete et Exsultate*, that God asks everything of us, yet God also gives everything to us. Let’s not be afraid to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit to allow God to enter so that our lives can be brought to fulfilment as we carry out the mission that is ours in the world.

FOR REFLECTION / DISCUSSION

- Q. Do you take time to discern what God might be calling you to? Do you make time for prolonged, silent prayer? In what ways could you incorporate this style of prayer in your life?
- Q. Have you experienced a disruptive call of God?

- Q. Is there anything holding you back from giving more to God?
- Q. Are you open to a newness that might disrupt you? Could you say 'yes' to this?
- Q. What do you think is the 'everything' that God wants to give to us?

THE EXAMEN

The Examen is a Jesuit practice originating from St Ignatius of Loyola that looks prayerfully at our thoughts, words and actions of each day. Through this spiritual exercise, we become attentive to our lived experience, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we become aware of God's presence in each part of our day. It allows us to discern where we acted with love and where we failed to, and resolve to better co-operate with God's will tomorrow. Pope Francis encourages us to adopt this practice as a way to grow in holiness each day. Try it now. If you are doing this exercise during the day, look over yesterday. If you are doing this exercise in the evening, look over today. Take your time - allow 15 minutes.

1 Ask God to be with you

Take a moment to quieten down and let yourself enter into God's presence.

**2 Give thanks**

Give thanks for the gift of today and the many ways you have been blessed. Call to mind two or three things from today that you are grateful for. Thank God for them.

3 Review the day

Guided by the Holy Spirit, look back prayerfully at your whole day, at your thoughts, words and actions at each moment. Notice how you acted in each situation, your feelings and motives. Where were you loving? Where did you turn away from loving? Think about specific people, places and events.

Where was God in each of these moments?

- Start with getting up in the morning – what was it like? Where was God?

- Move to the rest of your morning

- Think about the middle of your day

- What was your afternoon like? Where was God there?

- Now move to the evening – what happened?

- Remember the end of your day - where was God present to you?

4 Ask forgiveness

In the reflection on your day, you may have come across some shortcomings and things that you regret. Remember these, and express sorrow to God, asking God's forgiveness and the grace to do better.

5 Look to tomorrow

Was there anything especially meaningful that has come up in your reflection? Speak to God about this.

Look toward the day to come, asking for God's grace for tomorrow, especially in the areas that you feel called to improve. Resolve to cooperate and trust in God's guidance.

Q. Am I able to 'rejoice and be glad' as a child of God?