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Towards the end of his earthly life, St. Paul writes to St. Timothy “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith”

Defensibly, the New American Bible prefers “I have competed well” to “I have fought the good fight”. St. Paul is facing death, however. One competes well for things like bridge tournaments. When one has put life itself on the line, one is fighting, not merely competing.

As I noted a few weeks ago, the relevant Greek word, “Agon”, can correctly be translated in many ways. The English language is sensitive to the difference between “Fight” and “Competition”. That the Greek language was not says a great deal about the ethos of the ancient Greeks. For us, “competition” is definitely a mild word, and “fight” a spicier word. In this passage, St. Paul is facing death. I think that the spicier word is more appropriate. He is not talking about a hobby, like participating in an occasional golfing competition, for some charity, perhaps. He is talking about life and death. I noticed recently that a certain famous professional Quarterback aroused a minor controversy when he said something about Football being comparable to battle. Clearly, it isn't. Football is not about life and death. Battle is. The old Greeks would have used the word “agon” for both I suppose, but we would definitely use “competition” for Football and “fight” for battle. St. Paul, facing death, is talking about how he has laid his life on the line almost continually during three decades for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He expects that shortly he will be executed for it, as he was in the mid-60s during Nero's persecution of Rome's Christians. St. Paul hasn't competed, he has put his life on the line, and will shortly lose it in this world, gaining it for eternal life. Rather emphatically, “competition” is not the right word for laying your life on the line. St. Paul has been fighting, but fighting a very particular kind of fight, the “good fight” of the Faith.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith.

Fighting requires effort, even stressful effort. It is telling that our English word “agony” comes from the Greek word “agonia”, describing what being in a fight feels like. It is stressful. An all out effort to win is stressful, demanding hard work and acceptance of a certain level of risk.

The Good Fight of the Faith requires some hard work, and acceptance of a certain level of risk.

It seems to me that willingness to work hard for the Faith and to accept some danger is the true mark of all the saints. We err when we make consistently good judgment a requirement for sainthood. It might be that even in a moral matter a saintly person makes a mistake. A saintly person continues to learn, and is capable of repentance. What marks the saints is that they keep working, and remain unafraid.

The hard work of Faith is, first of all, the work of prayer. Commenting on “fighting the good fight”, the 6th Century scholar and monk Cassiodorus wrote “. . . you will scarcely ever find that when a person prays, some empty and external reflection does not impede him, causing the

attention which the mind directs on God to be sidetracked and interrupted. So it is a great and most wholesome struggle to concentrate on prayer once begun, and with God's help to show lively resistance to the temptations of the enemy, that our minds may with unflagging attention strain to be ever fastened on God". The first and most essential arena in which we fight the Good Fight is inside us, as we pray, simply refocusing our attention on the Lord, every time our minds have wandered or we have been distracted. That is no easy fight. For that alone, if we have persevered, a Crown of Righteousness awaits us.

The first thing in spiritual life is prayer. The first thing in prayer is just doing it. The second thing is fighting distractions.

The first thing in prayer is just doing it. That is the first thing in any enterprise, really. Struggling, since I've been in Powell, to get my physical exercise done, I asked a young man I know to keep me accountable to the goal of getting some exercise most days of the week. Now I am used to getting a message from him at 6:30 a.m., after his own daily workout, reminding me to get mine in. Apparently, he gets up early enough to start his workout at 5:30 a.m. Now the reason he does that is simply that 5:30 a.m. is the only time he can guarantee, or almost guarantee, that nothing else will get in his way. I haven't done that about my physical exercise yet, but, God be thanked, I have done that about prayer. I pass that on to you. Don't "find" time for prayer, set time for prayer. Make a daily appointment, and keep it.

So, the first thing I recommend in fighting the Good Fight of the Faith is setting a daily appointment for prayer, and keeping it. The second thing is, patiently but resolutely, fight distractions. Don't get angry when you realize that you've been distracted or that your mind has wandered. Just get back to work, and refocus on the word of God, and your response to that holy word.

The Saints are marked by such hard work.

They are also marked by some acceptance of risk. The saints, formally recognized or only informally, have had different personalities, but none have been cowards. In different ways, all saints are courageous.

Of the saints who are, so to speak, informally recognized, one that stands out for me is Christopher Columbus. He made some errors. In one profoundly stressful situation he once made a significant moral error. He had personality flaws that he never tried to conceal, and were there for all the world to see. It is unlikely, for those reasons, that he will ever formally be called a saint. Reading about him recently, however, I became convinced that there really was a whiff of holiness about him. That he was outstandingly brave is obvious. What is not obvious, until one looks more closely at his life, is that he had a capacity for repentance. On December 26, 1499, he had a near death experience, caught in a small caravel by a big storm. In his despair, he sensed God calling out to him "Oh man of little faith, be not afraid, am I not with you?" Suddenly, Columbus felt a surge of trust in God, but also an awareness of how he had

been led astray by greed. "Miserable sinner that I am", he wrote, for "putting all my trust in the vanities of this world"

Always outstandingly hard working and courageous, after his conversion experience Columbus didn't cease to be hard working and courageous, but he redirected that hard work and courage to be less at his own service and more at the service of the Faith. He never became completely selfless, and never had been faithless, but the balance had changed, in a way that makes me unashamed of speaking informally of Christopher Columbus as a (lower case) saint.

Having said that, it follows naturally that I am not going to be ashamed of encouraging men in the Parish to consider joining the Knights of Columbus. The Knights of Columbus is a Catholic Fraternal Organization dedicated to helping Catholic men be, well, truly Catholic and truly men, serving the Faith with some occasional hard work and even a little courage. As to occasional hard work, the Knights don't just put on breakfast sometimes after Sunday morning Mass. They put on Lent soup suppers, and an annual Harvest Dinner (coming up!). Apart from cooking (not one of my strong suits, I admit), they have helped take care of the church grounds, and Habitat for Humanity houses. As to some courage, the Knights of Columbus are quite publicly Catholic, and Catholicism is something that it is sometimes socially acceptable to attack. A lady, thinking about becoming Catholic, once remarked to me that she was surprised at how often quite respectable people she knew felt free in conversation to say unpleasant things about the Catholic Church. Being publicly Catholic in any kind of serious way risks at least some public disapproval and criticism, and the Knights of Columbus (unlike various political figures) are willing to do that, particularly when it comes to the defense of innocent human life, from conception to natural death.

The Knights of Columbus do good work, men. Consider becoming one. There are representatives of the Knights of Columbus at Mass today, happy to answer any questions you may have, and to invite you to join.

In emphasizing this mens' organization, I hope I don't lead anyone to forget the hard work and courage of Catholic women in this parish! When I ask "where would we be without them?", I imply that the Parish wouldn't exist without them. It wouldn't. Their work is a matter of life and death for the Parish. The contribution of Catholic women is that essential

. It does seem to me, however, that in many places men are less involved in the daily life of the Catholic Church, and often seem to think that the life of Faith somehow isn't as suited for men as it is for women. One college student, not studying in Wyoming but with family here, suggested to me that the occasional wrestling references in my sermons wouldn't fit in a lot of American parishes, where men, and especially young men, seem rare (he doesn't mind those references himself, but suggests that next time he's within range I owe him a match, putting my money where my mouth is, so to speak). Why is this the case? I don't know, really; but I sometimes wonder if one factor in this problem is a semiconscious decision to shy away from language that sounds a little too "manly" to some ears, such as replacing the traditional "fought the good fight" with "competed well"

Of course, we do have more than a few young men who are enthusiastic for the Faith. One I know, a freshman at Franciscan University in Stuebenville, is trying to raise money for his Spring Mission in Ecuador. This is part of Franciscan University's "Missions for Peace", an annual medical mission. This Spring a few medical personnel, accompanied by a team of 28 Catholic youth volunteers, will be going to villages bordering on the Amazon region, to share Christ's love by paying attention to people's needs. I think the young fellow has the right attitude, because when I remarked that this "adventure" sounded interesting, he retorted that it wasn't about adventure, but faith and charity. I suggested that, since Grace builds on Nature (as St. Thomas Aquinas observed), the natural desire of youth for adventure was being perfected, by that adventure being turned to the service of Faith and Charity. If you feel interested in helping this mission, I have information for you.

That is how it is with "fighting the good fight" Hard work and courage are natural things, implanted in human nature by the Creator. They can be corrupted, turned to selfishness. Hard work and courage can also be perfected, turned to holiness, when they are put, as St Paul put them, at the service of Faith and Charity.

Faith begins with prayer, so fight the Good Fight by setting an appointment for daily prayer, and by turning your mind back to prayer every time you realize you've been distracted.

Charity begins - does not end, but begins - at home, so start the good fight by doing your daily duty in your family and at work.

Fight the Good Fight, confident that, by God's Grace, you will one day be able to look back as St. Paul did, and say with him "From now on a crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the Just Judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for His coming"