

When you think of a healthy church, what comes to mind? Maybe one that is friendly and welcoming? Maybe one whose members are regularly involved in the congregation's activities? Maybe one that is engaged in its community and helping those in need? All good traits for a congregation, to be sure.

But what about fighting? If you hear that a congregation is constantly fighting, does that strike you as a good thing, or maybe a reason to consider looking for a different one? Probably the second, I'd say. Yet when we open our Bibles and consider what Christ has to say about His Church, we hear about a Church that fights. The Bible itself could even be seen as an account of the fight between the Lord God and all the forces of evil.

So then, as those who are baptized into the name of the Lord and gathered by the Spirit into His Church, you are all soldiers in that fight. You don't get an option. The Church not only can fight, it must fight. And since we are in a fight, it serves us well to learn what God would tell us about it. So today we turn to our reading from Ephesians and consider three questions: (1) What or whom are we fighting? (2) How do we fight? And (3) Why do we fight?

So to the first question: what or whom are we fighting? This is maybe where the problem lies when it comes to our negative perception of a fighting church. When we think of such fighting, we usually think about a congregation or church body fighting amongst itself. We think of conflict in among members, or tense congregational meetings, or cliques and divisions.

But what does the Bible tell us? "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

What is the Holy Spirit telling us through St. Paul? Our fight isn't against worldly institutions or people, per se. Rather it is against the spiritual forces of evil – the devil and all his ilk. He has been seeking mankind's destruction since at least the Garden of Eden, and he hasn't relented since then. If anything, he has redoubled his efforts, since as Scripture says, "he knows that his time is short."

What then does the devil or his activity look like, that we could recognize it in our world? God tells us that the devil is the father of lies. Therefore, wherever we see lies set against the truth of God and His Word, that is the devil at work.

For example, when the claim is made that certain nations or peoples are spiritually superior to others, contrary to the Biblical statement that before God there is neither Jew nor Greek, that claim is of the devil. Or when people are deceived into thinking that gender and sex are spectrums and able to be changed, contrary to God's declaration that He creates them male and female, that deception is from Satan. Or when governments or bureaucrats or councils or churchwide assemblies or any other institutions try to define marriage as anything other than the exclusive union of one man and one woman, those institutions are doing the work of evil.

Satan strives to worm his way into many different places, from giant corporations to the hearts of individual men and women. He'll take whatever ground he can. And so, wherever he and his lies are found, the Church must fight them.

But how do we fight? That's the second question. Our Lord spells this out for us in our reading. The first thing that must be noted is verse 10: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." It's not our strength that can overcome evil. It's not our charm, nor our persuasiveness, nor our reasoning, that will grant us victory. God may choose to make use of such talents as He grants them, but by themselves they can grant no lasting success.

The strength that the Lord Jesus gives to us is described by St. Paul as the equipment of a soldier. Consider each piece and the role that it plays in the Christian's fight.

Of note, the first element described is truth. Fitting, as we fight the father of lies. "Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth." Just as a soldier's belt holds together his equipment and keeps it at hand, truth holds together the other elements of a Christian's spiritual kit. If everything you say and do is grounded in the truth, you don't have to worry about it coming apart.

In another helpful comparison, a belt needs to be kept tight. Loosening it might feel more comfortable, but it won't be able to do its job, and might even cause embarrassment if it falls off. Likewise, you might be tempted to slack off of truth, especially to be more comfortable both with society and with yourself. But this inhibits your ability to fight as a soldier of Christ, and can also cause great shame if or when falsehood gets exposed.

Next, Paul speaks of the breastplate of righteousness. A breastplate protects some of the most critical parts of the body, especially the heart. Likewise, the righteousness of God, won for us by Christ, covers and guards our hearts. When we know that Jesus has already given us His perfect righteousness, and that we don't have to earn our own, we are protected from the attacks of guilt and worry that Satan would send about "not having done enough." Christ has wiped away our sins; we can go forth with the boldness of the redeemed.

After this, we hear of the "shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace." We see here that the Gospel, the Good News that Jesus has wiped out our sins and given us peace with God, leads us to go forth and share that Gospel with others. Roman soldiers marched wherever they went, and their sturdy leather sandals were essential to this.

Likewise, the Gospel is sturdy and enduring. It has carried Christians all over the world, in all different times and places and walks of life, without failing them. And it will not Gospel fail you.

Next comes our great source of divine protection. "In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one." Several points about faith come up here. The first is that it's faith that extinguishes the devil's flaming darts, rendering them harmless. Not reason to understand them. Not emotion to feel good in spite of them. No, it's faith,

that divinely given trust that clings to Christ above all which extinguishes the hellfire of the devil's attacks.

Second, note that, in order for the darts to be extinguished, you have to let them hit the shield. Satan's attacks cannot be sidestepped or worked around. They must simply be confronted with faith.

And this relates to a third point: your faith doesn't just protect you, but also others around you. In Roman and even Medieval times, a soldier's shield didn't just protect him. In formation, the shields would overlap, protecting multiple people and allowing the group to be better protected and fight more effectively. If a soldier broke formation or fled, he might make it to safety, but the other people relying on his shield were now exposed to danger.

So it is with faith. Faith isn't only an individual thing. There is also the one faith, the Christian faith, that we share. If one person waffles or sidesteps or folds in the face of the devil's attacks, others can be harmed. This is especially true of the young, of children, and also those new in the faith. They need examples of strong faith, Christians willing to stand against the flaming darts of evil, to help shield them and show them that the Lord's promises about faith are true. When the Church is unified in her confession of common faith, the devil's attacks have a much harder time finding an opening.

The last piece of armor is the helmet of salvation. The fact that Christ has saved us and made us His own, putting His name and seal on us, is our crown and joy as Christians. Like a breastplate, a helmet also protects essential parts of the body. The knowledge that we are saved, and that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, is a powerful protection against the various temptations that the devil would send against our mind.

Also, the confidence of salvation lets us see what's going on in the world around us while not fearing it, just as a good helmet provides visibility while still offering protection.

Finally, we get to the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. St. Paul reminds us here that the word, the Holy Scripture, comes from God the Holy Spirit, not man. It also needs to be stated that this is the one offensive tool described, compared to all the other pieces, which are defensive armor.

It is the word that drives the devil back, as Jesus demonstrated when the tempter came to Him in the wilderness. It is in the word where we will find the truth to cut through all the lies the devil sends at us. Relying on our own reason or feelings instead of the word is like swapping out a sword for a limp reed or a wet rag. And as a Roman soldier had to spend a lot of time practicing with his sword in order to be effective, so too must a Christian spend time in the Bible to be able to drive off the devil and his minions.

Covered in the full armor of God, side by side with others of faith, wielding the sword of the Spirit with skill, the Christian has everything he needs for the spiritual battle. That leads to the last question: why do we fight? Maybe it seems obvious, to fight evil. But this is an area where the devil attacks hardest of all.

Fighting is hard, and the battle is long and exhausting. It's always the easier not to fight, to give in, to surrender and go sit in the spiritual POW camp that is much of Western culture. It's also tempting

to quit fighting when those around you aren't fighting. Being a faithful, Bible-believing Christian grows harder as fewer other people are faithful Christians.

The devil also tempts us to think that by fighting, we'll drive people away. If we put down our swords, then maybe those on the other side will put theirs down, too. But the devil never gives up. And no captive will be rescued from the devil through spiritual pacifism.

It is tempting to yield, to lay down. But as St. Paul commends to us several times in this reading, we fight so that we may stand. In the strength of God, we stand, that the devil may not pull us down to the grave. By the strength of God we stand, that others may see us standing and be emboldened to stand as well. We stand, firm in the gifts that our Lord Jesus has given to us by grace. We stand in the footsteps of the faithful Christians who came before us, and we stand so that future generations may see and one day stand there as well.

As we stand, the devil will rage, because every Christian who stands unconquered reminds him of his failure to conquer Christ, who now stands forever exalted in heaven. The Church of God will stand and will fight until her Lord comes again to complete His glorious victory. We fight in the strength of Christ today so that we may share in the glory of Christ for eternity.

In the name of Jesus, amen.