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Interior Struggle (Palm Sunday)

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Like every Christian celebration, today's is one of peace. The palm branches, with their ancient symbolism, recall a scene of the book of Genesis: "After waiting seven more days, Noah again sent out the dove from the ark. In the evening, the dove came back to him and there

was a new olive branch in its beak.
So Noah realized that the waters
were receding from, the earth."
Today we remember that the alliance
between God and his people is
confirmed and established in Christ,
for "he is our peace." In the liturgy of
our holy catholic Church — which so
wonderfully unites and sums up the
old in the new — we read today the
joyful words which remind us of how
Jesus was greeted at his birth in
Bethlehem: "The sons of the
Hebrews, raising olive branches,
went out to meet the Lord, crying
out, Glory in high heaven." As he
moved off, St Luke tells us, "people
spread their cloaks in the road, and
now, as he was approaching the
downward slope of the Mount of
Olives, the whole group of disciples
joyfully began to praise God at the
top of their voices for all the miracles
they had seen. They cried out:
Blessed is the king who comes in the

name of the Lord, peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven."

Peace in heaven. But let's take a look at the earth. Why is there no peace in the world? That's right, there is no peace, only a certain appearance of peace: a balance created by fear and precarious compromises. There is no peace even in the Church. It is rent by tensions which tear the white robe of the Spouse of Christ. And there is no peace in many hearts which vainly strive to make up for their intranquility of soul by continuous activity, by seeking a thin satisfaction in things which do not fill them but only leave a bitter aftertaste of sorrow.

"The palm leaves," writes St Augustine, "symbolise homage, for they stand for victory. Our Lord is on the point of conquering by dying on the cross. Under the sign of the cross, he is about to triumph over the devil,

the prince of death." Christ is our peace because he is the victor. He has won the victory because he has fought, in a hard struggle, against the accumulated evil of human hearts.

Christ, who is our peace, is also the way. If we seek peace we have to follow his footsteps. Peace is a consequence of war, of struggle, of the intimate ascetical struggle which each Christian must keep up against everything in his life which does not belong to God. He is called to overcome pride, sensuality, selfishness, superficiality and meanness of heart. It is useless to call for exterior calm if there is no calm in men's consciences, in the centre of their souls, for "from the heart come evil intentions: murder, adultery, fornication, theft, perjury, slander."

But is not this rather an old-fashioned way of talking? Has it not been replaced by a more

contemporary language, a language which cloaks personal defects in pseudo-scientific terms? Surely people tacitly agree that the really valuable things are money which buys everything; influence; shrewdness which leaves you always on top; human maturity which defines itself as "adult," thinking it has outgrown the sacred?

I am not and never have been a pessimist, for the faith teaches me that Christ has conquered once and for all. He has given us, as a pledge of his victory, a commandment which is also a commitment: "Fight." We Christians have a commitment of love to the calling of divine grace, which we have freely accepted, an obligation which urges us to fight tenaciously. We know that we are as weak as other men, but we cannot forget that if we use the means available to us, we will become salt and light and leaven of the world; we

will be the consolation of God. Our determination to persevere in this resolution of Love is, moreover, an obligation of justice. This obligation — common to all Christians — implies a constant battle. The entire tradition of the Church has described Christians as milites Christi: soldiers of Christ. Soldiers who bring serenity to others while continually fighting against their own bad inclinations. Sometimes because we are short on supernatural outlook, in effect short on faith, we do not want to hear any talk of life on earth as a kind of war. We maliciously insinuate that if we think of ourselves as milites Christi, there is a danger that we might use the faith for earthly purposes, bringing pressure to bear, creating little isolated groups. This very naive line of thought is completely illogical and usually goes hand in hand with cowardice and love of comfort.

There is nothing further from the christian faith than fanaticism — that unholy alliance of the sacred and the profane, whatever guise it takes. That danger just does not exist if we understand our struggle as Christ has taught us to: as a war each of us makes on himself. It is a constantly renewed effort to love God better, to root out selfishness, to serve all men. Turning your back on this conflict, no matter what the excuse, means surrendering before you have begun to fight. Anyone who does so is brought low, without faith, depressed in his heart, blown this way and that by miserable pleasures.

Our spiritual combat in the presence of God and of all our brothers in the faith is a necessary result of being a Christian. So if you do not fight, you are betraying Jesus Christ and the whole Church, his mystical body.

A Christian's struggle must be unceasing, for interior life consists in beginning and beginning again. This prevents us from proudly thinking that we are perfect already. It is inevitable that we should meet difficulties on our way. If we did not come up against obstacles, we would not be creatures of flesh and blood. We will always have passions which pull us downwards; we will always have to defend ourselves against more or less self-defeating urges.

We should not be surprised to find, in our body and soul, the needle of pride, sensuality, envy, laziness and the desire to dominate others. This is a fact of life, proven by our personal experience. It is the point of departure and the normal context for winning in this intimate sport, this race toward our Father's house. St Paul says: "That is how I run, intent on winning; that is how I fight, not beating the air. I treat my body hard

and make it obey me for, having preached to others, I do not want to be disqualified."

To begin or sustain this conflict a Christian should not wait for external signs or nice inner feelings. Interior life does not consist in feelings but in divine grace, willingness and love. All the disciples were quite capable of following Christ on the day of his triumph in Jerusalem, but almost all of them left him at the shameful hour of the cross.

If you are really going to love, you have to be strong and loyal; your heart has to be firmly anchored in faith, hope and charity. Only people who are inconstant and superficial change the object of their love from one day to the next: that's not love at all, it's the pursuit of selfishness. When love exists there is a kind of wholeness — a capacity for self-

giving, sacrifice and renunciation. In the midst of that self-denial, along with painful difficulties, we find joy and happiness, a joy which nothing and no one can take away from us.

In this adventure of love we should not be depressed by our falls, not even by serious falls, if we go to God in the sacrament of penance contrite and resolved to improve. A Christian is not a neurotic collector of good behaviour reports. Jesus Christ our Lord was moved as much by Peter's repentance after his fall as by John's innocence and faithfulness. Jesus understands our weakness and draw us to himself on an inclined plane. He wants us to make an effort to climb a little each day. He seeks us out, just as he did the disciples of Emmaus, whom he went out to meet. He sought Thomas, showed himself to him and made him touch with his fingers the open wounds in his hands and side. Jesus Christ is always

waiting for us to return to him; he knows our weakness.

"Put up with your share of difficulties, like a good soldier of Jesus Christ," St Paul tells us. A Christian's life is a fight, a war, a beautiful war of peace and completely different from human warfare which results from division and often hatred. The war of the sons of God is a war against their own selfishness. It is based on unity and love. "Though we live in the world, we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God." The Apostle is referring to our relentless fight against pride, against our tendency to do evil and our exaltation of self.

On this Palm Sunday, when our Lord begins the week which is so decisive for our salvation, let us put aside the more superficial aspects of the question and go right to the core, to what is really important. Look: what we have to try to do is to get to heaven. If we don't, nothing is worth while. Faithfulness to Christ's doctrine is absolutely essential to our getting to heaven. To be faithful it is absolutely essential to strive doggedly against anything that blocks our way to eternal happiness.

I know that the moment we talk about fighting we recall our weakness and we foresee falls and mistakes. God takes this into account. As we walk along it is inevitable that we will raise dust; we are creatures and full of defects. I would almost say that we will always need defects. They are the shadow which shows up the light of God's grace and our resolve to respond to God's kindness.

And this chiaroscuro will make us human, humble, understanding and generous.

Let's not deceive ourselves: in our life we will find vigour and victory and depression and defeat. This has always been true of the earthly pilgrimage of Christians, even of those we venerate on the altars. Don't you remember Peter, Augustine, Francis? I have never liked biographies of saints which naively — but also with a lack of sound doctrine — present their deeds as if they had been confirmed in grace from birth. No. The true life stories of christian heroes resemble our own experience: they fought and won; they fought and lost. And then, repentant, they returned to the fray.

We should not be surprised to find ourselves defeated relatively often, usually or even always in things of little importance which we tend to

take seriously. If we love God and are humble, if we persevere relentlessly in our struggle, the defeats will never be very important. There will also be abundant victories which bring joy to God's eyes. There is no such thing as failure if you act with a right intention, wanting to fulfil God's will and counting always on his grace and your own nothingness.

However, a powerful enemy is lying in wait for us, an enemy which counters our desire to incarnate Christ's doctrine in our lives. This enemy is pride, which grows if we do not reach out for the helping and merciful hand of God after each failure and defeat. In that case the soul remains in the shadows, in an unhappy darkness, and thinks it is lost. Its imagination creates all sorts of obstacles which have no basis in fact, which would disappear if it just looked at them with a little humility. Prompted by pride and a wild

imagination, the soul sometimes creates painful calvaries for itself. But Christ is not on these calvaries, for joy and peace always accompany our Lord even when the soul is nervous and surrounded by darkness.

There is another hypocritical enemy of our sanctification: the idea that this interior struggle has to be against extraordinary obstacles, against fire-belching dragons. This is another sign of pride. We are ready to fight, but we want to do it noisily, with the clamour of trumpets and the waving of standards. We must convince ourselves that the worst enemy of a rock is not a pickaxe or any other such implement, no matter how sharp it is. No, its worst enemy is the constant flow of water which drop by drop enters the crevices until it ruins the rock's structure. The greatest danger for a Christian is to underestimate the importance of

fighting skirmishes. The refusal to fight the little battles can, little by little, leave him soft, weak and indifferent, insensitive to the accents of God's voice.

Let's listen to our Lord: "He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in very little is dishonest also in much." It is as if he were saying to us: "Fight continuously in the apparently unimportant things which are to my mind important; fulfil your duty punctually; smile at whoever needs cheering up, even though there is sorrow in your soul; devote the necessary time to prayer, without haggling; go to the help of anyone who looks for you; practice justice and go beyond it with the grace of charity.

These and many others are the inspirations we feel inside us every day, little silent reminders

encouraging us to outdo ourselves in the supernatural sport of overcoming our self. May the light of God show us the way to understand his directions. May he help us to fight and be with us in victory. May he not leave us when we fall but always help us to get up and return to the struggle.

We cannot take it easy. Our Lord wants us to fight more, on a broader front, more intensely each day. We have an obligation to outdo ourselves, for in this competition the only goal is to arrive at the glory of heaven. And if we did not reach heaven, the whole thing would have been useless.

Anyone who wants to fight has to use the available means, which have not changed in twenty centuries of Christianity. They are prayer, mortification and frequent use of the sacraments. Since mortification is also prayer — prayer of the senses —

we can sum up these means in two words: prayer and sacraments.

I would like us to reflect now on the sacraments, which are foundations of divine grace. They are a wonderful proof of God's loving kindness. Just meditate calmly on the Catechism of Trent's definition: "Certain sensible signs which cause grace and at the same time declare it by putting it before our eyes." God our Lord is infinite; his love is inexhaustible; his clemency and tenderness toward us are limitless. He grants us his grace in many other ways, but he has expressly and freely established, as only he can do, seven effective signs to enable men to share in the merits of the redemption in a stable, simple and accessible way.

If the sacraments are abandoned, genuine christian life disappears. Yet we should realize that particularly today there are many people who

seem to forget about the sacraments and who even scorn this redeeming flow of Christ's grace. It is painful to have to speak of this sore in a so-called christian society, but we must do so for it will encourage us to approach these sources of sanctification more gratefully and more lovingly.

Without the slightest scruple people decide to postpone the baptism of newly born children. Yet by doing so they seriously go against justice and charity by depriving children of the grace of faith, of the incalculable treasure of the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in a soul which comes into the world stained by original sin. They also try to change the true nature of the sacrament of confirmation, which tradition has unanimously seen as a strengthening of the spiritual life. By giving more supernatural strength to the soul, through a quiet and fruitful

outpouring of the Holy Spirit, confirmation enables the Christian to fight as milites Christi, as a soldier of Christ, in his intimate battle against selfishness and lust of all sorts.

If you lose sensitivity for the things of God, it is very difficult to appreciate the sacrament of penance. Sacramental confession is not a human but a divine dialogue. It is a tribunal of divine justice and especially of mercy, with a loving judge who "has no pleasure in the death of the wicked; I desire that the wicked turn back from his way and live."

The tenderness of our Lord is truly infinite. See how gently he treats his sons. He has made marriage a holy bond, the image of the union of Christ and his Church, a great sacrament on which is based the christian family that has to be, with God's grace, a place of peace and

harmony, a school of sanctity. Parents are the cooperators of God. That is the reason why children have the obligation of loving them. It is quite right to describe, as I wrote many years ago, the fourth commandment as the sweetest precept of the Decalogue. If you live marriage as God wishes you to, in a holy way, your house will be a bright and cheerful home, full of peace and joy.

In the sacrament of holy orders our Father God has made it possible for some members of the faithful, by virtue of a further and ineffable communication of the Holy Spirit, to receive an indelible character on their soul which configures them to Christ the priest so that they can act in the name of Jesus Christ, head of his mystical body. By virtue of this ministerial priesthood — which differs essentially and not only in degree from the common priesthood

of the faithful — the sacred ministers can consecrate the body and blood of Christ, offering God the holy sacrifice. They can pardon sins in sacramental confession and carry out the ministry of teaching the peoples "about everything that refers to God" — and nothing more.

A priest should be exclusively a man of God. He should reject any desire to shine in areas where other Christians do not need him. A priest is not a psychologist or a sociologist or an anthropologist. He is another Christ, Christ himself, who has to look after the souls of his brothers. It would be a sad thing if a priest thought himself equipped to pontificate on dogmatic or moral theology on the basis of some human science — which if he were really dedicated to his priestly work he could only know as an amateur or an observer. This would only show his double ignorance — in human science and theological

science — even though a superficial air of wisdom might deceive a few naive readers or listeners.

It is public knowledge that some ecclesiastics today seem to want to create a new Church. By doing so they betray Christ, for they change spiritual aims — the salvation of souls, one by one — into temporal aims. If they do not resist this temptation, they will leave their sacred ministry unfulfilled, lose the confidence and respect of the people, and create havoc in the Church. Moreover, by interfering intolerably with the political freedom of Christians and other men, they will sow confusion in civil society and make themselves dangerous. Holy orders is the sacrament of supernatural service of one's brothers in the faith; some seem to be trying to turn it into the earthly instrument of a new despotism.

But let's continue contemplating the marvel of the sacraments. In the anointing of the sick, as extreme unction is now called, we find a loving preparation for the journey which ends in the Father's house. And in the Eucharist, which we might call the sacrament of divine extravagance, God gives his grace and himself to us: Jesus Christ, who is always really present — not just during Mass — with his body, with his soul, with his blood and with his divinity.

I think very often about the responsibility that lies with priests to preserve the divine channel of the sacraments for all Christians. God's grace comes to the aid of every soul, for every person needs specific, personal help. You cannot treat souls en masse! It is not right to offend human dignity and the dignity of the sons of God by not going personally to the aid of each one. The priest

must do just that, with the humility of a man who knows he is only an instrument, the vehicle of Christ's love. For every soul is a wonderful treasure; every man is unique and irreplaceable. Every single person is worth all the blood of Christ.

We were talking previously about the need to fight. But fighting calls for training, a proper diet, urgent medical attention in the case of illness, bruises and wounds. The sacraments are the main medicine the Church has to offer. They are not luxuries. If you voluntarily abandon them, it is impossible to advance on the road, to follow Jesus Christ. We need them as we need air to breathe, the circulation of the blood, and light to appreciate at every moment what our Lord wants of us.

A Christian's asceticism requires strength, which is found in the Creator. We are darkness and he is

radiant light. We are infirmity and he is robust good health. We are poverty and he is infinite wealth. We are weakness and he sustains us, "for you are, O God, my strength."

Nothing on earth is capable of stemming the impatient gushing forth of the redeeming blood of Christ. Yet human limitations can veil our eyes so that we do not notice the grandeur of God. Hence the responsibility of all the faithful, especially those who have the role of governing — serving — the People of God spiritually, of not blocking the sources of grace, of not being ashamed of Christ's cross.

In the Church of Christ, everyone is obliged to make a tenacious effort to remain loyal to the teaching of Christ. No one is exempt. If the shepherds do not themselves strive to acquire a sensitive conscience and to remain faithful to dogma and moral teaching — which make up the

deposit of faith and the inheritance of all — then the prophetic words of Ezechiel will be borne out: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord God: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat of the sheep, you clothe yourselves with the wool... the weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them."

This is a strong reproof, but the offence against God is even worse when those who have received the task of promoting the spiritual welfare of everyone abuse souls instead, depriving them of the crystal water of baptism, which regenerates

the soul; of the soothing oil of confirmation, which strengthens it; of the tribunal which pardons; of the food which gives eternal life.

Such is the result when one abandons the war of peace. Anyone who does not put up a fight exposes himself to one or other of the slaveries which can chain hearts of flesh — the slavery of a purely human outlook, the slavery of a zealous desire for temporal influence and prestige, the slavery of vanity, the slavery of money, the slavery of sensuality...

Should God permit you to undergo this test, should you come across shepherds unworthy of the name, do not be scandalized. Christ has promised his Church infallible and unfailing help, but he has not guaranteed the fidelity of the men who compose it. They will never be short of grace, abundant and

generous grace, if they do the little God asks of them: if they strive with the help of God's grace to remove the obstacles which get in the way of holiness. If that effort is missing, even he who seems to be very high up, may be very low in God's eyes. "I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead. Awake, and strengthen what remains of your flock, which is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you have received and heard; keep that and repent."

This exhortation, which comes from St John in the first century, is addressed to the person in charge of the church in the city of Sardis. So, a weakening of some shepherds' sense of responsibility is not a modern phenomenon. You find it also at the time of the Apostles, in the very century in which our Lord Jesus

Christ lived on earth. It is simply that no one is safe if he ceases to strive against himself. Nobody can save himself by his own efforts. Everyone in the Church needs specific means to strengthen himself: humility which disposes us to accept help and advice; mortifications which temper the heart and allow Christ to reign in it; the study of abiding, sound doctrine which leads us to conserve and spread our faith.

The liturgy of Palm Sunday puts these words on our lips: "Swing back, doors, higher yet; reach higher, immemorial gates, to let the king enter in triumph!" Anyone who barricades himself in the citadel of his own selfishness will never come down onto the battlefield. But if he raises the gates of his fortress and lets in the king of peace, then he will go out with the king to fight against all that misery which blurs the eyes and numbs the conscience. "Reach

higher, immemorial gates." The fact that Christianity requires us to fight is nothing new. It has always been that way. If we do not fight, we will not win and if we do not win, we will not obtain peace. Without peace human joy is illusory, fake, barren, and it is not translated into service of men, or works of charity and justice, of pardon and mercy, or the service of God.

Today, inside and outside the Church, high and low, one gets the impression that many people have given up the struggle — that personal war against one's own weaknesses — and have surrendered bag and baggage to slaveries which debase the soul. It is a danger which always confronts Christians.

That is why we must insistently go to the Holy Trinity asking God to have compassion on everyone. When talking about this subject, I hesitate

to refer to God's justice. I appeal to his mercy, his compassion, so that he will not look at our sins but will rather see the merits of Christ and of his holy Mother, who is also our mother, the merits of the patriarch St Joseph whom he made his father, and the merits of the saints.

A Christian can rest completely assured that if he wants to fight, God will take him by the right hand, as we read in today's Mass. It is Jesus the king of peace who says on entering Jerusalem astride a miserable donkey: "The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm." This violence is not directed against others. It is a violence used to fight your own weaknesses and miseries, a fortitude which prevents you from camouflaging your own infidelities, a boldness to own up to the faith even when the environment is hostile.

Today, as yesterday, heroism is expected of the Christian. A heroism in great struggles, if the need arises. Normally, however, heroism in the little skirmishes of each day. When you put up a continuous fight, with love, in apparently insignificant things, the Lord is always present at your side, as a loving shepherd: "I myself pasture my sheep, I myself will show them where to rest — it is the Lord Yahweh who speaks. I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded, and make the weak strong.... They will feel safe in their own pastures. And men will learn that I am Yahweh when I break their yoke straps and release them from their captivity."
