

TWENTY SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
2025

“Fight the good fight of the Faith, to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.” (1 Timothy 6:12)

I have long considered this verse from today's Epistle (1 Timothy 6: 11-16) a particularly powerful verse. I admit that the power of this verse is weakened by the New American Bible translation (the only Bible translation authorized for use at Mass in the USA) rendering it as “compete well for the Faith”. Compete well! This is the spirit of modern athletics, with which I have no complaint, the spirit of “It doesn't matter whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game.” This is not, however, the spirit of ancient Greek athletics. The word “Agon” (from which we get the English word “agony”, which says something) started out describing ancient Greek combat sport events, which were extremely rough. In those combat sports, an athlete put up with enormous pain and discomfort in his quest for the championship - and only the championship mattered. There were no prizes for second or third place. I agree that the modern approach of honoring all good efforts is better, but that wasn't the way things worked in the time and place of St. Paul. By his time, the word “agon” had expanded to describe non-combat athletic events, and even musical and theatrical competitions, but the spirit of the word hadn't changed. It still meant doing all that you had to do, within the rules, to win. It meant intensely hard work in musical and theatrical events. It meant bodily pain and exhaustion in all athletic events. It meant actual blood and injury in the combat events. In all of these, “agon” meant an absolutely unyielding determination to win, something better captured by the traditional translation “fight” than by the milder and more modern translation “compete”.

What St. Paul recommends to Timothy is an absolute and unyielding determination to persevere in the Christian Faith and to teach the Christian Faith.

How many of us have an absolute and unyielding determination to persevere in the Christian Faith and teach the Christian Faith?

Without absolute and unyielding determination, so characteristic of the Church's martyrs down through 20 centuries, the Christian Faith dies. Without absolute and uncompromising determination, one compromise in one generation is followed by another in the next, and by still another compromise in the succeeding generation, until nothing is left of the Faith that God once bestowed for the Salvation of all who cling to it with sincerity and integrity.

For now, I will put aside active persecution of Christianity, which exists in many places in this suffering world, most particularly in parts of Africa and India. For now, consider simply the atmosphere in parts of Europe and America, where holding onto the entire content of the Christian Faith is regarded as primitive, annoying, and even offensive (“how dare you say that God made humanity male and female!”) Even in a few places in America and Europe, there have been isolated bursts of genuine persecution, as in the recent deadly attack on Catholic school children in Minneapolis. More normal in much of Europe and America, however, is harassment, consisting of episodic legal or police intimidation, occasional censorship, and intermittent outbursts of threatening anger.

Under such harassment, even naturally brave people get discouraged. Naturally brave people can steel themselves to face a direct bodily threat or one episode of physical danger. Intermittent harassment, however, is something different. You are never really in danger, but

you are never really left in peace. You wear down, especially when even some of your fellow Christians suggest that things would be easier for everyone if you would just compromise a little. You start to think, "Could the loudest voices in the world around me really be wrong? Maybe I'm being too strict. Maybe I need an updated, "politically correct" version of Christianity?"

Thus, without quite meaning to, a once sincere Christian falls away from the Faith. Other Christians look at the newly compromising Christian, apparently a pillar of the Church, perhaps a prominent and active lay person, or perhaps priest or bishop, perhaps even a cardinal. They look at that newly compromising Christian, and instantly feel a wave of discouragement. After the wave of discouragement passes, comes self doubt. "Maybe we are making a mistake? Maybe the Christianity passed onto us by the Bible and the Saints who went before us is partly wrong? Maybe the Bible needs correction from today's wisdom? Maybe the Saints could take a lesson from today's leaders?" Affected by all too human social anxiety, a much stronger force in the long run than mere physical fear, they don't want to be the last stubborn Christians, uncooperative and not "team players." Many, perhaps sometimes most, fall away, not all at once, but step by compromising step, and little by speciously justifiable little.

The Christian Faith, humanly speaking, has survived because of a stubborn remnant, the ones resolved not to compete well, but to fight, the ones uncompromisingly resolved to persevere in the true Christian Faith of the Bible and the Saints. These are the Martyrs.

The Martyrs are not without their moments of doubt and uncertainty, but, by the Grace of God, they persevere in the Faith through those moments. They are not a random remnant. God has chosen them to be joined to Jesus Christ in His Sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world. Joining themselves, by God's Grace, to the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, they are, with Christ, atonement both for their persecutors and their weak brethren.

To those who, by God's Grace, remain firm in the Faith, the Son of Man speaks with the words spoken in Revelation to the Church of Ephesus, "I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for My Name's sake, and have not grown weary." (Revelation 2:3)

After that word of encouragement to the Church of Ephesus, the Son of Man has a word of challenge. "You have abandoned the love you had at first" (Revelation 2:4). As St. Paul tells us in First Corinthians, "If I have all Faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:3). Without Love, Faith itself becomes curdled and unwholesome, and the Fight of Faith is no longer a GOOD fight. As St. Augustine warned long ago, there is always the terrible danger that we might come to love a belief not because it is TRUE, but because it is OUR belief. That happens when we are no longer moved by God's Love. What damned the rich man in today's Gospel (Luke 16:19-31) is not what he did, but what he failed to do from complete lack of love. More even than the Faith for which they fight heroically, it is Love that makes the Martyrs God's chosen Saints, His Holy ones whose death is precious in His sight.

We do not know the ways in which the Lord will allow our Faith and Love to be tested. We do know that He will give, for the asking (and He Himself inspires the asking!), the strength to pass any test. We should not worry about future tests. It is enough for us today to become, with God's help, a little more humble, faithful, merciful, gentle, and self disciplined, to "crucify the flesh with its desires and passions" (Galatians 5:24). This may not seem like much of a martyrdom, but this is enough to make us, by God's Grace, saints. May God's Saints who have gone before us in holy Love and in the good fight of Faith welcome us into the joys of Heaven!