

Every Christian's Battle Plan

By Fr. Dan Gehler, St. Anthony DSM

The moment is solemn. Jesus is at table with his intimate collaborators, his handpicked Twelve Apostles. He knows that this is the last time they will be gathered in this way until they meet again in eternity. Nothing is carelessly said. Everyone on their deathbed has their final words, their legacy: these are the Lord's final words. Jesus explains that he has loved us, and that he longs for us to remain in his love, to stay in his friendship, so that we may experience the indescribable joy that flows from true love.

And then he lays down his New Commandment, the summary of all his teaching and of his entire life: "love one another as I love you." The Ten Commandments of the Old Testament were summarized by Jesus during his public life in two commandments of the New Testament: Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. But now, at the climax of his earthly mission, Jesus combines those two into a final, New Commandment: love one another as I have loved you.

This is the Christian battle plan. At the Last Supper, Jesus was on the verge of his final battle against evil and all the forces of darkness. And the Church he is forming, this church, will take that same battle to the ends of the earth and to every corner of human history and culture.

The plan is so simple and straightforward, summed up in this single, final, definitive command: love one another as I have loved you. We are Christ's soldiers, and that is our mission. Sometimes when we see the opposite of something, we appreciate it better. The opposite of Christ's battle plan is the devil's battle plan.

And the devil's battle plan is symbolized in literature by a mythological beast that we are all familiar with: the dragon. Dragons are present in the literature of almost every major culture in human history. There is something universal about this strange, powerful, fantastic monster. Dragons have only one desire: to hoard as much treasure as they possibly can. And so, they go around breathing fire and causing massive death and destruction. And wherever they go, they gather gold, silver, valuable jewels, magnificent swords and armor - anything of value that they can get their claws on. But then what do they do with it? They put it in a big pile somewhere in an inaccessible cave, and they sit on it. It's of no use to them, or to anyone else. They don't buy things with the gold or silver; they don't display the jewels; they don't defend justice with the swords and armor - they just sit on top of their hoard and keep it all to themselves; they are beastly Scrooges.

That's exactly what the devil wants each one of us to do. He wants us to be more and more self-absorbed and self-centered. He wants us to use our God-given talents, strengths, and interests just for ourselves (if we use them at all), just to make ourselves rich, powerful, comfortable, or popular.

That's the opposite of Christ's battle plan! Just as God poured out his generous love by creating the universe and giving us existence, so Jesus invites us to pour out our talents and energies in building up society and doing good for those around us. We are not created to be dragons; we are created to be children of a creative, redeeming God. It's easy to understand this concept, but it's not so easy to live it. We are fallen human beings living in a fallen world. We tend to default to self-centeredness, which is just the opposite of loving one another as Jesus has loved us. Keeping to our battle plan takes constant attention and realignment.

In sports, in the heat of the game a team can start deviating from their game-plan. When that happens a good coach calls time-out, brings the players over to the sidelines, and reminds them of the game-plan. We need to do the same thing in our following of Christ.

One practical way to take this kind of spiritual time-out every day has a long tradition in the Catholic Church. It's called the nightly examination of conscience. It usually takes about five or ten minutes. You do it at night, before you go to bed. It's very simple really. You start by reminding yourself of God's presence. Then you ask God to enlighten and guide your thoughts. And then, in an atmosphere of calm prayer and reflection, you think back over your behavior during the day's activities, talking about it with the Lord (sometimes it helps to do this in writing). With the Holy Spirit's guidance, you begin to see patterns: which situations and relationships brought out your selfishness, where you had a chance to be more Christ-like and squandered it, where you didn't. At the end of the examination of conscience, you ask forgiveness for your sins and then identify a concrete way to improve the next day. Following Christ's battle plan is the path to true wisdom and lasting joy.

This week, why not take a spiritual time-out each night, and see if that helps us follow it a little bit better?