

## 7. Hold Fast, Go Forward, Fear Nothing

“In performing the duties of the present moment, everything tends to draw us from the path of love and simple obedience.”<sup>1</sup>

--Caussade

“There is nothing more generous than a soul which, afire with faith, sees only the working of God in all troubles and the most deadly dangers. . . . Stricken with terror, our senses suddenly cry to the soul: “Unhappy wretch, now you are lost and there’s no hope of rescue!” The robust voice of faith instantly replies: “Hold fast, go forward and fear nothing.”<sup>2</sup>

--Caussade

*<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. <sup>12</sup>For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. <sup>13</sup>Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. <sup>14</sup>Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, <sup>15</sup>and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>18</sup>And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. <sup>19</sup>Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup>for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.<sup>3</sup>*

--St. Paul

I spent eight years in the Air Force reserves, and although several times it looked like I would be called up for duty, I never was. My life slipped neatly between flare-ups in other parts of the world. Then I was too old; then I was ordained; our family was too large. So I would be reduced to reading about campaigns on foreign soil, of crusty

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<sup>1</sup> Caussade, Abandonment to Divine Providence, p. 94. Emphasis mine.

<sup>2</sup> Caussade, *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 6, NIV. Emphasis mine.

generals and prison camps, of sociopaths who “loved to make living things dead.” I read a lot.

War is a difficult subject for a religious community, unless the community has taken a theological stance against making war with another people. It is possible to justify war-making and peace-making (anti-war) by appealing to the Christian Scriptures. Moses and David of the Old Testament, as well as others, were political and military leaders. War-making was part of their business. On the other hand, one searches long and hard trying to find justification for war-making in the teachings of Jesus. Was the Redeemer a pacifist? I do not care for pigeon holes myself; I would rather say that Jesus elevated peace-making to such a level that His people must of necessity take a no war stance. Besides, He didn't have time for war; He was too busy making peace. I have met many Christian across the years that differ with me on this issue, sometimes with a good bit of anger mixed in.

**Hitler the Killer:** Having been born at the beginning of World War II, and having taught graduate courses on Nazism and the Jews, I can make a pretty good argument for Bonhoeffer's attempt to kill Der Furher. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran minister and theologian during the attempted rise of the Third Reich in Germany. After much inner soul searching Bonhoeffer decided it was his duty to attempt to kill Hitler, a sociopath who believed himself destined to rid the earth of Jews (and others) and establish a pure Arian race to rule the world. What does one do in the face of unprovoked aggression coming your way? Hitler was pure evil, and evil never takes a day off. Is Hitler too far back? Then how does a Christian respond to the horror of September 11, 2001?

**Jesus the Messiah:** At the same time, what does one do with Jesus' clear teaching in His Sermon on the Mount?

*<sup>43</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor<sup>[a]</sup> and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup>But I tell you: Love your enemies<sup>[b]</sup> and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>If you love those who love you, what*

*reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.<sup>4</sup>*

Many who heard Jesus, especially Zealots, would have boiled over at His statement about loving one's enemies. Cadoux observes that Jesus "never, even remotely contemplates a disciple of his acting as the instrument of God's punitive justice."<sup>5</sup> One more observation: For the first three centuries of the Christian Church, Christians did not participate in the Roman military. During this time though, the Christian life was understood as a type of spiritual warfare, the Church borrowing a metaphor from Roman culture. If you lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, you were well aware of the brutality of Roman soldiers. War for them was hell. What Paul likened Christian faith to warfare, he was saying that at times it was hell to be a witness. Those Christians who died in the arena would say "Amen!" to that.

In the Old Testament, enemies of Israel were considered automatically to be enemies of God. In the New Testament, Rome was not considered by the Church as an enemy of God, though there were plenty of reasons to do so, as corrupt as the Roman state was. In addition, Christians could not tolerate the Roman notion that the emperor was himself a god, although some thought that of themselves.

### **Blood and Guts**

That's what his soldiers called General George Patton: "Old Blood and Guts." That is an apt description of war, as I have discovered it. Blood, bones, guts, legs, twisted faces and bodies, children with rifles, pain and tears, death. "Old Blood and Guts Patton."

**What is War?** It might help here to define what we mean by war. "**War** is a reciprocated, armed conflict between two or more non-congruous entities, aimed at reorganizing a subjectively designed, geopolitically desired result."<sup>6</sup> That is hefty, isn't it? As far as I am concerned, three words are really all that is needed in defining war. See

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:43-48, NIV. Emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> Cecil J. Cadoux, The Early Church and the World, pp. 54-55. The Christian community is not to try and pass judgment on others. That is the prerogative of God (as we see in the Book of Hebrews).

<sup>6</sup> Warsearch.com.

if you agree. **War** is “organized state violence.” This is war as we ordinarily think of it. However, in the Old Testament, war may be made between one or more states and Yahweh...and God. David and Goliath represent a type of war, winner take all for one’s nation. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus the Messiah will come on a white charger on whose thigh is printed: “King of kings, Lord of lords.” In the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of Revelation, war is carried out between the resurrected King of kings and Satan, the great enemy of things good and true.

But, as both Testaments teach, war can also be a spiritual conflict between the forces of the Almighty and the forces of evil. The locus of war cannot be seen, only its results. Actually, this is the theology or philosophy behind all kinds of war, between nations, among families, within oneself over temptation, war against disease, etc. There is a struggle being carried on as I write and you read between what is right and what is wrong. One thing is sure: All of us think our side is right. Gray says,

“Death in war is commonly caused by members of my own species actively seeking my end, despite the fact that they may never have seen me and have no personal reason for mortal enmity. It is death brought about by hostile intent rather than by accident or natural causes that separates war from peace so completely.”<sup>7</sup>

There have to be reasons why someone unknown to me looks at me as a target rather than a potential friend, as someone to kill without mercy (old or young) but in delight and, as Jesus said, thinking all the while they are doing something good for God. Allah Akbar! I have never heard a bomber say, “Praise to Jesus the Messiah!” I’m not saying no one ever did this; one has the Ku Klux Klan as an example of white man extremism...which is similar to Hitler in philosophy. I am saying that person was no follower of the Nazarene as regards war between nations or attitudes towards people unlike themselves.

There is an interesting progression of thought in the Bible as regards God as warrior, sufferer, and incarnate king. In the earlier books of the Old Testament, the Torah and Books of History, God functions as warrior/king, literally fighting with Israel against her enemies (Egypt, Moab, Babylonia, Assyria, etc.). Israel comes out on top,

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<sup>7</sup> J. Glenn Gray, The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle, p. 100.

even in lopsided battles where she is clearly in the minority. By the time of the Psalter, however, Yahweh has a more ambivalent role, sometimes as fighter, more often as fellow sufferer. With Jesus we have the incarnate King who dies at the hands of His enemies, only to triumph over them at the end of history as leader of heaven's armies. Whereas the Bible begins with the chosen people participating in making war, with Jesus His disciples do not participate in warfare. In fact, one of the distinguishing factors of the Church is its stance toward enemies: loving, personal sacrifice for the good of the enemy. Many Christians, including Stage IIIers, live in the OT, and eye for an eye. I have met many believers who stop short of Jesus' attitude toward enemies (say those who blew up the Twin Towers in Manhattan). It is odious to them to think of praying good prayers for such bombers, rather, as one fellow said during an interview, "We should kill them all (them being women and children as well as warriors). Jesus came in part to change our attitudes toward others. He is the only possible peace in the world. But it is easier to "kill them all" rather than to think through what it might mean for the Church to act like Jesus' followers in today's world. It is not easy, but it is necessary.

"In performing the duties of the present moment," Caussade says, "everything tends to draw us from the path of love and simple obedience." We have not yet discussed what Caussade means by the "present moment." We will come back to that concept soon. Basically Caussade means that we should be living in the present moment, neither the past nor the future. But now we want to look at his comment "everything tends to draw us from the path of love and simple obedience." We probably should put it this way: Whatever does not help us *to* God detracts us *from* God. And this need not mean bad things, but maybe even good things.

Can we have too much chocolate cake? Yep! Too much can make you sick, as some of you well know. And what is better than chocolate cake? Caussade helps us by saying this: "**We must reach the stage when all that the world contains ceases to exist and God is everything to us.**"<sup>8</sup> Caussade illustrates this by saying that in our zeal we may have a particular pious practice that is one thing too much, unneeded. One candle too many. Or we may become confused by trying to follow the advice of too

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<sup>8</sup> Caussade, Abandonment to Divine Providence, p. 74.

many good people. The best ideas are simplicity and humility. Open yourself to what God wants and leave the rest alone. I have known perfectly sincere people in absolute chaos because they wanted to be a missionary, or a teacher, or a pastor...not really knowing what to do. Then, believe it or not, good things become heavy, when what we most certainly need is God alone. Discover who you are in Him, do what He calls you to, and trust God to raise up others to do what you are not called to do.

Now of course we can have too much of a bad thing. The Testaments continually warn us about this. Leave evil alone! Satan will do whatever he can to dupe you, even force you out of God's will, if he can. The temptations of our Lord (Matthew 4:1-11) are examples of this. The evil one comes as an "angel of light" and spreads evil everywhere through you. To make his point, Caussade lays it on thick: "Dwelling in God we are dead to all things and all things are dead to us."<sup>9</sup> By being dead to all things the Fathers of the church mean the loss of attraction. The one, overarching attraction to us is God through His Son, Jesus, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. If we focus on Jesus and copy Him, we learn His mind and therefore become God-centered. It is not as hard as it sounds. The Lord has made us with the capacity to love Him at all times. So what about our other relationships? If Christians can be believed, they are enhanced, deepened. We love more freely and more deeply. Christ enables you to become a more loving parent, a more responsible employee, a more reflective citizen. You might test this out by asking your Sunday study group how they find their lives enhanced by love for God.

**The World of Violence:** The notion of war helps Christians know and understand better their mission in Christ to the world. Why are we here? Thomas Merton, spiritual guide and author, says,

"Christ our Lord did not come to bring peace to the world as a kind of spiritual tranquilizer. He brought to His disciples a vocation and a task, to struggle in the world of violence to establish His peace not only in their own hearts but in society itself. This was to be done not by wishing and fair words but by a total interior revolution in which we abandon the human prudence that is subordinated to the quest for power, and follow the higher wisdom of love and of the Cross."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Caussade, *Ibid.* P. 75.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, p. 112. Emphasis mine.

The one thing I do not have to prove is that the world in which we live is in fact a world of violence. This is simply an assumption of human life, indeed, of animal life as well. The existence of violence defines the Christian mission: We are “peacemakers,” as our Lord has said in His Sermon on the Mount. Merton again,

“Violence rests on the assumption that the enemy and I are different:

the enemy is evil and I am good. The enemy must be destroyed and I must be saved. But love sees things differently. It sees that even the enemy suffers from the same sorrows and limitations that I do. That we both have the same hopes, the same needs, the same aspiration for a peaceful and harmless human life. And that death is the same for both of us. Then love may perhaps show me that my brother is not really my enemy and that war is both his enemy and mine. War is *our* enemy. Then peace becomes possible.”<sup>11</sup>

St. Paul says virtually the same thing in Ephesians 6. We Christians put on the full armor of God, which has often been noted as front pieces only, nothing for the back.

*“..... be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. <sup>12</sup>For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. <sup>13</sup>Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.*

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but “against **the cosmic powers of this present darkness**, against **the spiritual forces of evil** in the heavenly places.” Yes, this is the “craftiness” or “schemes” or “wiles” of the devil. He thinks up ways to bring you down (Psalm 37:32).

I doubt that many Christians see their life *in* the world as a life *against* the world. But the New Testament, especially the Gospels and 1 John, says we are in a fight for our lives, so to speak.<sup>12</sup> Thank the Lord that Jesus is on our side and takes up the battle for us. We simply do not have the ability to fight victoriously against Satan in our own

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-65. Emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> Look up Ray C. Stedman on the Inter Net. His articles on spiritual warfare might help you as you consider the role of Christian witness in the world and the forces that oppose our message. I further suggest that you follow up by some reading on the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enables us to recall Jesus' teaching and apply it to our lives and the lives of others. The early church understood only too well just how dangerous malicious spiritual forces can be.

strength. It is hard enough to own a war we can see, i.e., in Iraq, for example, much less one we cannot see, in the Spirit.

I have spent a lot of time on the subject of war. There is a reason for that. As one of my sources on the effect of war on human beings says, War turns the values of society completely upside down. By that he means before war an individual probably would not choose to take a weapon and kill another person. His values—or even his society’s values—would put him in jail for that. But in war it is the state that says killing, even murder, is okay, more than okay, it becomes our duty and the state will honor us for killing specific others. In our normal lives we tend to think it is wrong to lie, but in war we can lie without guilt, given the situation. Besides, war is undoubtedly understood best as a struggle with violence and all the negative things that attend it...that we know. It is part of the language of sports, of religious commitment, of entertainment, of the high points of our society’s culture and history.

### **Let us soar like an eagle**

“So come! Never mind weariness, illness, lack of feeling, irritability, exhaustion, the snares of the devil and of men, with all that they create of distrust, jealousy, prejudice and evil imaginings. Let us soar like an eagle above these clouds, with our eyes fixed on the sun and its rays, which are our duties.”<sup>13</sup>

As we see, Caussade was no Pollyanna preacher. God is in His heaven; all is right with the world! None of that. Reading the Old Testament prophets we learn that many Israelites believed that nothing really bad could happen to Jerusalem since that was the seat of the great Temple. God is certainly not going to let anything dreadful happen to “His house” is He? To ask the question seems to answer it. Then came the Assyrians and later the Babylonians, and the Temple was torn down stone by stone. The Holy articles were taken off and the gold and precious stones became the property of hostile barbarians and their war machines. The weeping prophet Jeremiah lamented the plight of the people; their sins had destroyed the mighty symbol of their security and hope.

<sup>15</sup> All who pass your way  
clap their hands at you;  
they scoff and shake their heads

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<sup>13</sup> Abandonment, p. 73.

at the Daughter of Jerusalem:  
"Is this the city that was called  
the perfection of beauty,  
the joy of the whole earth?"  
<sup>16</sup> All your enemies open their mouths  
wide against you;  
they scoff and gnash their teeth  
and say, "We have swallowed her up.  
This is the day we have waited for;  
we have lived to see it."<sup>14</sup>

The people raised a mighty cry; their children were starving; their crops plowed under; their young men taken captive. What is there to do? How can we recover and once again know the blessing of the Lord? The prophets said it: Repent and seek the Lord! Jesus would come along and say it: Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand! His sturdy apostles would proclaim the same message: Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand! Today we live in the time of the Spirit and the Spirit's call is for us to repent and know the blessings of the Lord. We can once again soar like an eagle.

These bold pictures are for us. We live in a world of unimaginable terror, what with the stockpiles of weapons held by the nations. The United Nations seems helpless as a fundamentalist Islam threatens the existence of civilization in our time. Hollywood projects a wasted world during the season when the Christian Church is supposed to be hailing the birth of the Savior. Caussade saw much the same kind of world in his day. France, where he lived, would soon be in turmoil and civil war. Yet Caussade dared to say that the church could once again soar like an eagle. Caussade did not shut his eyes and stick his head in the sand. Neither did he run and hide from the reality of pain.

"We cannot help being aware of all these evils, of course, and we cannot be indifferent to them, but let us never forget that ours is not a life governed by our feelings. We must live in **those upper reaches** of the spiritual life where God and His will are active in a process which is eternal and unchanging."<sup>15</sup>

### **"The upper reaches"**

What are these "upper reaches" Caussade speaks of? Where must we live if we are to transcend the violence that surrounds us; what must we do if we are to be genuine

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<sup>14</sup> Lamentations 2:15-16, NIV.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Emphasis mine.

peacemakers? These are not idle questions. They are questions of life and death. It might be helpful to think about such questions in preparation for our next installment. By Caussade's time, spiritual writers were thinking about the shape of the life that pleases God. Suppose you were to think about that now? What would you think necessary if in Christ war was to give way to peace?

There were at least four ingredients of a peaceful life, of a life triumphant over "blood and guts." They were (1) humility, (2) vigilance, (3) the will to resist, and (4) prayer. Can you think of ways these characteristics of peace could be the "upper reaches?" What do you think writers like Caussade were thinking about when they used such words? Can you define them,

use them in a sentence,

make them into a prayer?

We will begin the next installment with a discussion of these four concepts. May God give us the spiritual graces and strength that is required for such a life.

--Jerry L. Mercer

--January 16, 2010

*Less than a week ago at this writing a monster earthquake turned the country of Haiti upside down. A poor country during its best times, many of the citizens of Haiti, in particular Port-Au-Prince, are homeless, without food and water. I am sure such a situation breaks your heart and many of you are helping. Please continue to ask our heavenly Father to show mercy and send the kind of help this country needs. On one level the earthquake happened as a result of the sudden slipping of tectonic plates on which that part of the world sits. Geologically Haiti is a touch place to live. It will continue to be the natural target for such upheavals. But now the "big one" has happened there. May this be an occasion when love is poured out toward its people.*