

# *Facing Our Enemies*



## *Meditations on The Precautions of St. John of The Cross*

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### Preface

The Precautions of St. John of the Cross were written for the Carmelite sisters in the community of Beas near El Calvirio, Spain, around the year 1579. The work is a concise summary of doctrine regarding the three enemies in the spiritual life: the world, the devil, and the sensuality of the self. The Precautions are best understood in the larger context of the journey in the spiritual life to union with God. In the daily battle towards our goal of union with God, we are formed and strengthened in the struggle with these enemies.

While The Precautions are written in a predominantly negative style, this series of meditations emphasizes the affirmative action to be taken in facing the enemies of the spiritual life. It is our hope that by meditating on the rich doctrine found in The Precautions and on the related Scriptural passages, that we may be better equipped for battle, and that we may be able to ally ourselves with the urging of St. Paul: *“I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”* (Romans 12.1-2)

## Enemies Of The Spiritual Life

In the journey to union with God, we face three enemies: the devil, the flesh, and the sensuality of the self. All three must be conquered for us to be freed to live fully as children of God. St. Paul offers us this analogy to prepare for battle: *“Draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. Put on the armour of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil... So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all (the) flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones.”* (Ephesians 6.10-11,14-18)

### Three Foes

Each of us face three enemies:  
The world, where our wants abound;  
The devil’s snaring subtleties;  
And self’s contraries that confound.

Allied against the soul’s true call,  
They work as one resisting force:  
Strengthened with each stumble and fall;  
Weakened as we trudge on our course.

Freedom is forged like blacksmith steel:  
In the furnace, heated red hot;  
On the anvil, pounded with zeal --  
In formation, this is our lot.

Beyond these foes, true freedom lies;  
The one who fights to win is wise.

May the Lord prepare us to be battle-ready and strengthen us to persevere against our foes.

*“Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.”* (1 Corinthians 9.25-27)

## **Against The World**

In the battle against the world, it is important for us to strive towards our goal of union with God with a great and unrelenting determination. The enticements of the world burden our hearts and draw us away from God. In our relationships with one another, our differences, weaknesses, and intolerances work against our effort to love our neighbour as we should. May we strive to follow the counsels of St. Paul: *“Do not be conformed to this world... Love one another with mutual affection... Have the same regard for one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not be wise in your own estimation... If possible, on your part, live at peace with all”* (Romans 12.2a, 18, 26)

## **In The World; Not Of The World**

Love each person as Jesus would  
Without the taint of judgement's stain:  
Forget the bad; uplift the good –  
In their affairs, outside remain.

Travel lightly with fewer things;  
Be a good steward of God's gifts.  
Detachment clears the heart and brings  
A true freedom, with peace that lifts.

Strive for peace in your heart and mind,  
Centered on God, with self-restraint.  
Perceptions are, at best, just blind –  
Shield others from your heart’s complaint.

Yield not to scandal, nor to praise;  
With gilded tongue, the world speaks.  
In silence kept, the pure heart stays  
At peace – God’s good is all it seeks.

Freed from the world and its chains;  
Centered in peace, the heart remains.

May the Lord free our hearts from the chains of human curiosity and meddling in the affairs of others, that we may free one another and preserve the peace of Christ within. Detached from the world and its goods, may we live for God alone.

*“I have told you this so that you might have peace in Me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world.”* (John 16.33)

## **Against The Devil**

In our battle against the devil, we must keep in mind that the main goal of the devil is to block us from doing the will of God. He places obstacles and stumbling blocks of countless kinds on the road ahead. We must be very cautious against the clever wiles of the devil, and strive never to engage in conversation with the clever, deceptive dialogue of the lies and rationalizations he uses to justify his courses of action. We must strive to seek shelter in the virtue of humility, for it has been said that “it is only the devil that praises you.”

Just as Jesus used scripture in facing the devil in the desert, we too should rely on the power of the Word against the devil. We must remember who he is beneath the clever disguise: *“The devil... was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks in character, because he is a liar and the father of lies.”* (John 8.44)

## **Resist The Devil**

Humble servants don't analyze  
The Master's motives or His ways;  
They know their place and realize  
Their service lies beneath God's gaze.

Be faithful to duties assigned;  
Keep focus on the task at hand.  
With obligations e'er in mind --  
A servant at the Lord's command.

The dark one often masquerades  
Beneath the guise of good intent;  
He justifies with guile and lays  
His snare as if 'twas heaven-sent.

Resist him and he will take flight;  
The humble servant's unworthy  
To receive an angel of light –  
One's defence is humility.

The peace of Christ he cannot feign;  
In humble hearts, the Truth will reign.

May the Lord guide us to the fullness of the truth by way of  
humility that we may avoid the subtle snares of the evil one.

*“So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”* (James 4.7)

## Against The Self

The sensuality of the self, by the very nature of its passions, keeps the body immersed in sin. How often we pay attention to the shortcomings of others, while our own sins remain unchallenged. The self is the most difficult enemy of all to conquer, and the tactic of opposing the passions of the self most often fails. If we learn to channel the passions of the self into the effort we put forth in humble service to the Lord, we can harness the energy of our passions and put it to good use. Zeal will become our strength, that we may heed the words of St. Paul: *“Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer.”* (Romans 12.11-12)

### Persevere

Submit to trials, blow by blow,  
As stone beneath the Sculptor’s blade.  
Formation is painful and slow --  
The Sculptor’s hand is rarely staid.

Each of us is a work of art  
And artisan by word and deeds.  
Strive to love others from the heart --  
Forgetting self, see to their needs.

In service, always persevere,  
Regardless of the joy or pain;  
Don’t let your feelings interfere –  
Consistency will be your gain.

Seek first the cross whene’er you pray;  
Embrace it as you love the Lord.  
Feelings often get in the way --  
Sowing distraction and discord.

In prayer, and service, persevere;  
Feelings aside, the road is clear.

May the Lord instill a spirit of constancy within our hearts; that we may persevere despite the satisfactions, aggravations, delight, and distaste.

*“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”* (1 Corinthians 15.58)

## References

Scripture quotations are adapted from several Catholic editions

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