

# Landry: Defend your castle when it's under siege

I've always had an appreciation for stories told in medieval settings. From the legends of King Arthur to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Braveheart*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, I've often found that it captures my imagination to see knights ride into battle, swordplay or an army laying siege to an enemy castle.

Historically, there are four main tactics employed by invading armies to capture an enemy castle, and each one has varying degrees of effectiveness and risk.

The first three were simple and brutal: bash in the front gates with a battering ram, scale the walls with long ladders, or take down the castle walls by any means necessary (tunnels, explosives, catapults, etc.) These tended to bring with it many casualties on both sides, and victory would often belong to whichever army had greater numbers.

The fourth strategy – to surround a castle in hopes of (eventually) starving a surrender out of its occupants – depended largely on the resolve, patience, and provisions of the attacking army as it could stretch into months. An invading king or general would risk all of this – the potential casualties and the time spent – because the capture of an enemy castle brought with it riches, honour, and power in that medieval world.

Imagine, though, being one of the guards in the tower who saw an enemy approaching. It would be your responsibility to sound the alarm to the castle, and in turn, to prepare for a long and difficult battle in hopes of enduring the oncoming assault. And while the simple, brutal attacks required one response, being surrounded in hopes of being starved out depended on preparations you had done long before the invading army was first spotted.

It was perhaps with this in mind, that St. Paul challenged the Ephesians to put on the armour of God (Ephesians 6:10-20) and to be ready for battle. Paul wrote "...we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12).

What was true for the Ephesians is true for us, today. In his *Catechetical Instructions*, St. Thomas Aquinas identifies three enemies against which all Christians do battle: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Each enemy has its own tactics to lay siege to our faith; at certain times doing a direct assault on our hearts and minds, and at others playing the long game while awaiting our eventual surrender.

While C.S. Lewis presents some of these tactics at length in his *Screwtape Letters*, St. Thomas offers a simple explanation for the strategies of each. He says that “the world tempts us either by attaching us to it in prosperity, or by filling us with fear of adversity.”

The rewards that would lead kings and generals to assault an enemy castle – wealth, prosperity, notoriety – remain motivating factors for many in western culture today. Much of the advertising we consume promises us one of these three things if only we give our time and attention to the product or service being offered to us. While it would seem to be human nature to want to avoid unnecessary suffering, our culture has lost a real sense of the value of redemptive suffering – a key virtue in the lives of many saints (including St. John Paul II.)

Aquinas also says that the flesh “tempts us by attracting us to the swiftly passing pleasures of this present life.” Just as Jesus had to admonish St. Peter on Holy Thursday night “So you could not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26:40-41), we do battle against ourselves.

We are often willing to make compromises here, saying to ourselves “what’s the harm in an extra glance at an attractive woman or man?” or “I deserve to indulge on \_\_\_\_\_ after all the good/hard work I did earlier,” or even “why should I turn down this vice when everyone around me is giving in?”

St. Thomas also reminds us that the devil “...would have us disobey God and not be subject to Him.” His encounter with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) lays bare some of his tactics: to challenge our trust in God and convince us that what we seek can only be achieved by our own efforts. Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness after 40 days with no food (Luke 4) tells us that he doesn’t play fair; we are often tempted the most in those moments when we are the most weak.

It could be easy to despair here, and to ask what hope we have, when we’re matched up against such foes. We’re tempted, we fail, we see others around us who aren’t even trying to do battle ... and we’re left wondering if it’s even worth the energy to fight at all.

It’s likely that anyone inside a castle facing the siege tactics mentioned above might feel the same way. They would need to have confidence in the strength of the walls, in the training of the garrison charged with protecting it, and in the volume of provisions set aside.

We ought to follow a similar pattern: training ourselves, by prayer and fasting, to build up a resistance to temptation. To have confidence in the strength of the Church that Jesus left for us, promising that the gates of hell would never prevail against her (Matthew 16:18) – even if it seems to leave us rattled.

And most of all, we need to remember that St. Paul's warning to "suit up" for battle began with a reminder to "be strong in the Lord and the strength of His power" (Ephesians 6:10). We don't ever face these enemies alone. In the end, no matter the enemy, and no matter the tactics, *God wins the day*. Our part is to stand firm and, as St. Paul did with his own life, trust in all of God's promises.

"The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."  
–Psalm 18:2

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