

## *War as We Know it: the Spiritual Life*

**W**e can learn many things from history—even things about the spiritual life.

This past summer I was doing some extra-curricular reading in world history. While focusing on the European Campaign of World War II, I came upon the battle memoirs of General George S. Patton, Jr., *War as I Knew It* (1947). What a find! General Patton was a hero of mine when I was a boy. Reading his memoirs was like rediscovering an old friend.

General Patton certainly was a personality. Who can deny it? Yet, what impresses me the most about him is that he was a man of principle, who spent much effort thinking out the principles of warfare and learning the art of soldiering. By reading *War as I Knew It*, one can follow General Patton thinking out the war as he knew it.

There seems to have been three principles that especially guided General Patton in his military operations.

The first principle can be summed up in one word: “offense.” General Patton believed in offense. Attack, attack, and attack again. Keep hitting. Even in defense, offense is best. He

writes: “Pacifists would do well to study the Siegfried and Maginot Lines, remembering that these defenses were forced; that Troy fell; that the walls of Hadrian succumbed; that the great Wall of China was futile; and that, by the same token, the mighty seas which are alleged to defend us can also be circumvented by a resolute and ingenious opponent. In war, the only sure defense is offense, and the efficiency of offense depends on the warlike souls of those conducting it” (*War as I Knew It*, Pyramid edition 1966, p. 222).

The second principle can be summed up in one word also: “audacity.” General Patton believed in boldness and daring. In war, be bold, use audacity, and seize the victory!

The third principle is: “Do not take counsel of your fears.” It is tied up with his second principle. Thus, he writes: “In

planning any operation, it is vital to remember, and constantly repeat to oneself, two things: “In war nothing is impossible, provided you use audacity,” and “Do not take counsel of your fears.” If these two principles are adhered to, with American troops victory is certain” (*War as I Knew It*, p. 308).

One might be tempted to say, “What did old



*St. Michael and the Satan*  
by Raffaello Sanzio (ca.1518)

Blood ‘n’ Guts know about fear?” The fact is, as General Patton himself readily admits, he had to fight fear and anxiety like the rest of us. He writes: “I always had a very funny feeling at such times. The plans, when they came into mind, seemed simple, but after I had issued the orders and everything was moving and I knew that I had no reserve, I had a feeling of worry and, as usual, I had to say to myself, ‘Do not take counsel of your fears.’ The sensation is very much like that I used to have steeplechasing. I was always very anxious to ride the race, but when the saddling bell rang I felt scared. When the flag dropped and the race was on, my fear left me,” (*War as I Knew It*, p. 108).

The spiritual life can be conceived of as a kind of combat. Indeed, the Holy Scriptures speak of it in this way. The spiritual life is a fight against self, against Satan, and against sin. We all know what a hard fight it is. Sometime read again Chapter 7:15-25 of St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans—sound familiar?

In this way, I think we can find General Patton’s three principles of warfare helpful to us in our own spiritual combat.

First, think offense, always offense. Fight and keep fighting. Advance and keep advancing. There is an old maxim that says that you cannot stand still in the spiritual life. Either you are going forward or you are going backward. I think we all know this by experience. If we stop fighting, if we try to coast, we soon find ourselves in trouble. Fallen human nature pulls us down. In the spiritual life, we must always keep advancing

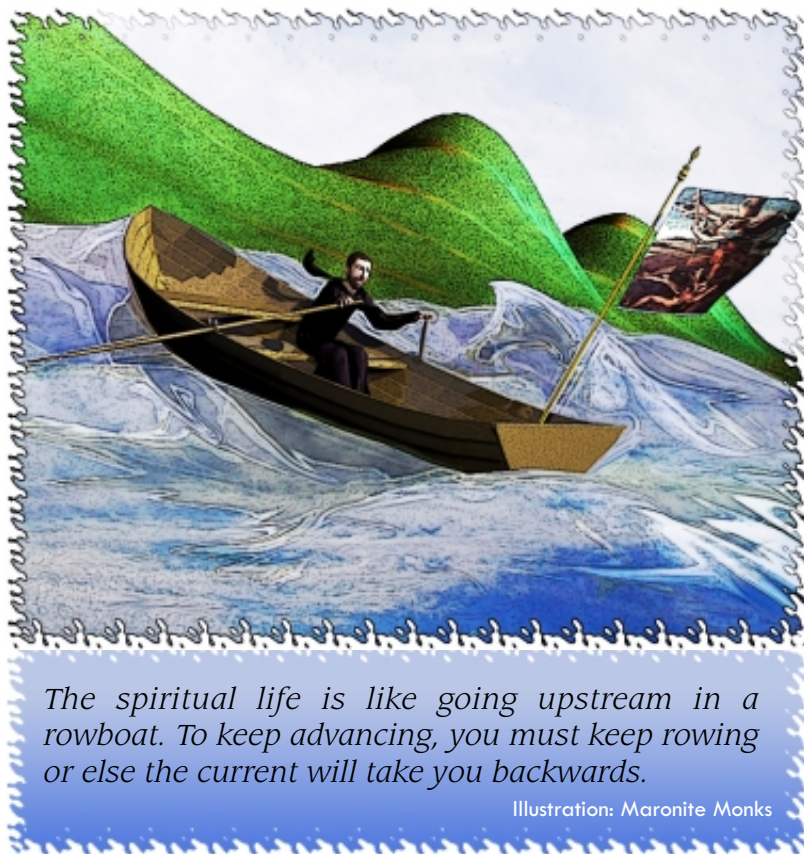
and we must always keep fighting. To illustrate the principle, spiritual authors give us the image of a man in a rowboat trying to go upstream. He must keep rowing to go forward. If he stops to rest, he will not stay in one place; he will go backward, taken by the river’s current. The same applies to us in the spiritual life: we must keep rowing; we must keep fighting; we must keep advancing!

Second, use audacity! Be bold! Look at the saints. They did great, even astounding things, by the grace of God. “For with God nothing is impossible” (Lk 1:37 RSVce). I am not just

talking about miracles but even such things as Blessed Mother Teresa’s tremendous work for the poorest of the poor. Do not say, “Who am I? What can I do?” Say rather, “Here I am, Lord. What do you want of me?” Follow God’s call and He will take care of the details. Always remember that nothing is impossible with God.

Third, “do not take counsel of your fears.” Again look at the saints. They had fears and anxieties like we have, but they did not let these rule them. Thus, the victory was theirs. St. Francis of Assisi testified that he had a great fear of lepers. One day, however, he went against his fear and embraced a leper. Henceforth, lepers became sweet to him and he served them gladly and without fear.

We can see these same three principles at work in the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, Who



*The spiritual life is like going upstream in a rowboat. To keep advancing, you must keep rowing or else the current will take you backwards.*

Illustration: Maronite Monks

is our true model in the spiritual life.

First, we see Our Lord take the offensive. In the gospel of St. Mark (11:27-33 RSVce), we find one notable occurrence. When the Jewish authorities questioned Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?” He did not go on the defensive. No, he took the offensive! He shot back, “I will ask you a question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things...” Moreover, we can say in general that the whole mystery of the Incarnation is the mystery of God on the offensive. God became Man—hitting the beaches, as it were, to save us!

Second, we see Our Lord’s audacity. Maybe the best example of this is His entry into Jerusalem. He knew full well what awaited him in Jerusalem. He even foretold to His apostles that He would suffer and be put to death. Yet, as St. Luke writes,

“he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Jesus exemplified a holy audacity by entering Jerusalem to fulfill the plan of our salvation.

Third, Our Lord took not counsel of His fears. When did He fear? At the garden of Gethsemani. He even sweated blood. He said, “Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine be done” (Lk 22:42 RSVce). Thus, He shows us not to listen to our fears, not to be overcome by them. The way to do this is to turn to our heavenly Father, to pray, and to entrust ourselves to His holy Will.

The spiritual life is one long war. We need to be superb soldiers for Christ. How do we measure up? The beginning of a new year is a time to take stock and to begin again. Let us take stock of our spiritual lives and begin anew the spiritual combat.✠