

(English translation)

April 1990

Word of Life

“Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”
(Mt 26:41).

These are words that Jesus addressed to Peter, James and John when he found them overcome by sleep during his agony in Gethsemane. He took these three apostles with him — the same three that had witnessed his transfiguration on Mount Tabor — to have them close to him during that extremely difficult time. This was their opportunity to prepare themselves through prayer together with Jesus, because the events about to take place would be a terrible trial for them as well.

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In order to understand these words, we should keep in mind the circumstances in which they were said. What Jesus was giving his disciples was more than words of advice. We should see these words as reflecting his state of mind, that is, how he was preparing himself for the trial.

Facing his imminent passion, he prayed with all his soul, wrestled with the fear and horror of his death and totally entrusted himself to the love of the Father so that he might be faithful to God’s will to the end and help his apostles to do the same.

We see Jesus here as the model for all those who must face trials and, at the same time, the brother who stands by our side in those difficult times.

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Jesus often gave exhortations to be vigilant. For him, to be on guard meant not to ever let ourselves be overcome by spiritual “sleepiness.” It meant to be always ready to welcome the will of God, to discern its signs in everyday life and above all to be able to see difficulties and sufferings in the light of God’s love.

Vigilance and prayer are inseparable, because prayer is indispensable for overcoming trials. The fragility of human nature (“the flesh is weak”) can be overcome by the power coming from the Spirit.

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How then should we live this month’s passage? We too should ready ourselves to meet trials: the small and big ones of each day. They are the trials which we cannot help but encounter from one day to the next. Now the first condition for overcoming a trial, any trial, Jesus advises, is to be on guard, to “watch.” It is a matter of discerning, of realizing, that God permits them not to discourage us, but so we can grow spiritually as we overcome them.

And at the same time we must pray. Prayer is necessary because there are two particular temptations to which we are vulnerable in these moments. One is to think we can go it alone. The other is the opposite feeling, that is, the fear of not making it, as if the trial were greater than our strength. Jesus instead assures us that our heavenly Father will not leave us without the power of the Holy Spirit if we stay on guard and we ask him with faith.

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