

## First Sunday of Lent

Today's Gospel recounts for us the three great temptations that Satan places before Our Savior at the outset of His public mission. These three temptations correspond to three deeply rooted infirmities in all human beings who have inherited Original Sin. Jesus was not subject to the consequences of Original Sin, but in this confrontation with Satan, Jesus is representing all of us who are wounded by Original Sin, just as he was representing us when he was Baptized in the Jordan, would be representing us when he suffered, died and was buried and rose from the dead. Whatever he did, he did for us, and when he confronted Satan and his temptations and triumphed over him, he did it for us.

But what can we learn from these three temptations with regards to our own struggles. First there is the temptation to indulge and even over indulge our various bodily appetites, even if that indulgence means violating God's commandments. Thus Satan, mistaking Christ for one of us, a mere mortal and son of Adam, and knowing that Christ is hungry after a 40 day fast, encourages Jesus to perform a miracle that would show no respect for the divinely established natural order of the world. He suggests that Jesus should change a stone into bread simply to satisfy his hunger, a very real need of human beings. But Christ's miracles with respect to the natural world will always respect the general order of nature and how it works, even while producing natural effects that nature itself cannot produce. Thus Christ will multiply bread from bread, and He will convert water into wine; and these are things that nature itself does, though not as Christ will do it. So Christ would not

totally void God's natural order simply to satisfy his own hunger, by starting from a rock and turning it into bread. So too, we must not violate the commandments to satisfy a real need of our nature, like hunger, or indulge a disordered desire for pleasure of the senses, if the way we choose to do so is contrary to the moral order, to the moral law of God. St. John calls these temptations, *the lust of the flesh*.

Secondly, as a result of Original Sin, man also has a disordered desire for power and glory to satisfy the human ego. At times we feel a powerful desire to be the center of everything, to be the focus of everyone's attention and we become subject to flattery. This temptation is also manifested at times in the disordered desire for power in society and the disordered accumulation of wealth that brings such power and glory. Thus Satan offers Christ the power and glory of ruling the whole world, if only Christ will first subject himself to Satan. But Christ refuses such glory, and chooses to be powerless in this world, to be totally dependent on God and give all the glory of his mission to God alone. Yet, how many men, and women, have chosen to prostrate themselves before the Prince of this world to gain so much less power and glory than was offered to Christ. *St. John refers to this temptation as the lust of the eyes and pride of life*.

Thirdly, there is an even more subtle temptation for fallen man when we are tempted to force God to show, to prove, His good will towards us, by doing our bidding. We may try to force God's hand, as it were, by doing something that is contrary to his will, and then expecting God to rescue us from our folly to prove that He loves us. Thus Satan tempted Christ to leap from the temple and be saved by angels to prove

that God was His loving Father and Guardian. His adversaries would often demand such proof from him, but Christ refused to put His Father's love for Him ever to the test, even on the Cross. Yet, how often do men put God to just such a test: if you love me, rescue me from this debt, from this disease, from my unhappy life? Christ called this temptation, *putting the Lord Our God to the Test*.

The temptations of Christ and the way he prepared for them are meant to teach us how we must live if we are to conquer the manifold temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. Though he was God, Christ was also truly man. It's true that He was conceived free from Original Sin and its disordered inclinations (which we are not free from), yet Christ chose to undergo forty days of fasting and prayer, in the wilderness, before he encountered Satan and his temptations. Why did he do all this if not to teach us that we, who *are* sinners, who do suffer from the disorders of sin, original Sin and our own sins, must regularly discipline our appetites, and renew our wills in obedience to God's will. Since we are wounded by sin, denial of the bodily appetites is a necessary discipline for us if we are to bring those appetites under the control of our will. Without such exercises of self-denial, we simply will not have strong enough wills to resist when the world, the flesh, and the devil set temptations before us that appeal to our disordered appetites.

At the same time, we see that Christ would frequently withdraw from the public eye, to pray and refresh His soul, as he was doing in that desert. Prayer was his life line to the Father. Do we not need that same life line as well, and do we not need to remove ourselves periodically from the public life to pray, and to learn the glory of self-denial, lest we

become prey to flattery and the desire to have our ego stroked by others.

The whole temptation scene shows us that Christ always chose to be powerless rather than powerful, poor rather than rich, to leave himself totally in the hands of His Father. That is the ultimate key to victory over the temptations of the world, of the flesh, and of Satan. He would not accomplish his mission by power or force, or by wealth, but simply by the unconditional surrender of his will to His Father's will. The Lenten practice of charity especially help us to break free from the desire for power and riches in this world, and to recognize where our true strength lies, and surrender ourselves to that source of freedom and redemption.

Finally, I said at the beginning that Christ underwent these temptations not for his sake but for ours. He did this to teach us vital truths about how we must discipline ourselves to conquer the world and its temptations, the temptations of our own flesh, and the attacks of Satan and his minions. But he also did this as our representative, as the head of the body he would make his own, the Church. Satan fears Christ who defeated him in the desert of temptations, and who crushed him by His saving death on the Cross and his resurrection. Satan now fears Christ and knows who He is. To the degree that Satan sees Christ the Victor in us, he fears us and fears to attack us. When Satan sees us conquering sin in our own flesh and rejecting the lure of the world's temptations, he recognizes Christ operating in us, present in us, and he hesitates to engage in battle with Christ in us. The more we use the disciplines of lent, the more Christ begins to rule in us, calming our passions and

appetites and placing them under the control of our wills. Satan sees this and understands. The more this happens, the less he dares to meddle, because it is not us he fears, but the one whom he recognizes in our humanity, renewed and triumphant by His grace. Amen