

## 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday Lent Yr A: The Devil *Attempts* to Tempt Jesus

The Devil, Satan, plays an important part in the world history. In the form of a serpent, he tempts first Eve, and then Adam, to eat the forbidden fruit.

That Original Sin marks the fall of the human race from God's grace and friendship. The Gates of heaven close. Deprived of divine grace, human beings become slaves of the Devil.

To win back Sanctifying Grace, a share in God's own divine life, and make us His children once again, the Son of God becomes man and dies on the cross to redeem us from our sins, and free us from slavery to the Evil One.

To prepare for His public ministry, Jesus, after His baptism by John in the Jordan River, retires to the desert to pray and fast for 40 days.

And as we see in the Gospel today, Satan tries to tempt Jesus.

Who is Satan? A fallen angel.

Who are the angels? They are creatures, pure spirits, who, like us, have a rational intellect and free will.

But the angelic intellect is far superior to ours. Angels know things not by reasoning things out; rather, their great intellects allow them to grasp or understand things immediately.

We know that God created all the angels good. At the time they were created, before they were allowed to enter into God's presence and see God, the angels were given a test of obedience.

The common teaching of the Church holds that God revealed to the Angels that the human beings would fall from God's grace, that the Son of God would become man to redeem the human race, and that the angels would have to worship and adore the God-man, Jesus Christ; also, they would have to venerate the woman who would be Mother of God, Mary.

We think about a third of the billions of angels, led by Satan – the most beautiful and intelligent of all the angels – and moved by pride, rebelled at the thought of worshiping the God-man, Jesus Christ, and *especially* having to venerate the

woman, His Mother, Mary. Why? Because the angelic nature, being pure spirit, is above our lowly human nature, made up of both body and spirit.

And because of their great intellects, the angels understood fully that their rebellion against God was final and definitive.

And so was their separation from God: When these angels disobeyed, Hell began.

The Devil and the other fallen angels are offered no opportunity to repent, because their free wills, guided by their great intellects, are hardened and fixed forever in opposition to God's will.

In other words, the fallen Angels, Satan and the rest of the demons, would refuse to repent to even if they were offered it by God, so hardened are they in their stubborn, sinful pride.

Satan and the other fallen angels are in hell, but God, in His providence, permits them to tempt us. This is a mystery. But God gives us grace to reject temptations.

*How* do the devils tempt us? By suggesting things to us.

All they can do is suggest things; they cannot force our wills to obey them and disobey God, because our wills are free. All the demons in Hell cannot force us to commit even the smallest of venial sins.

But because we are fallen creatures, our free wills are inclined to rebel against God's will in order to do our own will, and sin.

We call this inclination to sin concupiscence; and manifests itself in particular in seven ways, which we call the seven deadly sins: PLACES-G: pride, lust, anger, covetousness, envy, sloth, and gluttony.

In our first reading from Genesis we see evidence of both pride and lust: They desire to be like gods (sinful pride); and they can no longer look at one another in innocence in their nakedness – they feel shame from lust, so they sew fig leaves to cover themselves.

Now Jesus, being perfect God and perfect man in one divine Person, was of course free from concupiscence.

But Satan did not know this, because he really did not know that Jesus was God in the flesh.

Now, the devil and the other fallen angels would have known certain things about Jesus from their observations – e.g., that He had been conceived without Mary having had relations with Joseph.

Saint Cromantius, a fourth-century bishop, stated: “[Satan] had heard that it had been announced by the angel to the Virgin that she would give birth to the Son of God. He saw the Magi.... He saw, after [Jesus’] baptism, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. He also heard the Father’s voice from heaven saying, ‘This is my Son.’”

Still, knowing that Jesus was “Son of the Most High God” doesn’t give the full picture of who He is. Though Satan could see that Jesus was a holy man of virtue, he did not know that He was the Word made Flesh – His Incarnation remained concealed.

But from what the Prince of Darkness did observe about Jesus, he was very much puzzled and perturbed.

St. Cromantius continues: Satan heard John with a loud voice proclaiming, “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

No doubt Satan, who had filled the world with sins, feared now that someone had come to take away the sins from the world.

Another early Saint, Hilary, says that the Devil “had despaired, seeing Christ fast for forty days; but perceiving that afterwards he was hungry [since God could not experience hunger], he began to hope again” (In Matt, ii.3).

So now, in an attempt to discover who Jesus really is, he sets out to tempt Him, knowing that if he yields to the temptations, he need not be too concerned.

This is why Satan begins his temptations saying, “*If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread . . . throw yourself off the Temple.*”

The CCC (538) teaches that temptation is an attraction, either from outside oneself or from within, to act contrary to right reason and the commandments of God.

It progresses to fulfillment, in sin, according to Pope St. Gregory the Great, by beginning with suggestion, continuing on to delight, and concluding with consent.

In the case of Our Lord, who could not be tempted from within (because He was God) but only from without – in this case, from the Devil himself – delight in sin was not possible; nor could He ever consent to it.

So the Devil, that most cunning serpent who Jesus tells us is “a liar and a murderer from the beginning” (Jn. 8:44), knowing Jesus is hungry, urges Him to turn stones into bread.

Jesus refuses. Had He worked this miracle, it would have revealed his identity – which He did not intend to do.

The second temptation as recorded by St. Matthew: “Throw yourself down from the Temple, for the angels will bear you up.” Worthy of note here that Satan quotes Scripture here. Yes, the cunning serpent knows Scripture, and can use it for his own advantage. But this temptation is a clear example of Satan putting God to the test, just to satisfy his curiosity. Would God send His angels to save Jesus from being injured – or, if Jesus is God, will He save Himself?

Finally, the Devil shows Our Lord all the kingdoms of the world, saying, “All of these will be yours if you fall down and worship me.” This temptation reveals Satan growing even bolder in his sinful pride; for if Jesus is indeed God, to offer Him the all kingdoms of the world with all their riches in return for worshiping him, is pure blasphemy.

Our Lord says to him, “Begone.” This should be our immediate response to every temptation that the Devil or his demons may set before us. We do not want to “dialogue” with the devil, engage in conversation with him, for he is extremely clever and we will come out the losers. This is the trap that Eve fell into, and we know “the rest of the story,” as they say.

The Evil One comes disguised and speaks slyly to us to ensnare us – often with sweet words. But make no mistake: As St. Peter warns us, the Devil “prowls about like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” – and sometimes he does devour.

St. John Chrysostom wisely notes that *often times we do not seek our salvation as eagerly as Satan seeks our damnation.*

This past Ash Wednesday, we received ashes in the form of a cross on our foreheads as a sign of our feeble fallen human nature that one day will “return to dust.” The Gospel provides us with the road map that we must travel to Calvary, and Jesus gives Himself as an example to follow in our Lenten journey, with prayer and fasting.

Through these holy practices, along with acts of charity, let us consecrate this holy season of forty days – to arm ourselves against the attacks of the enemy.

To quote Archbishop ListECKI: “Prayer should always be a part of our daily routine, but during Lent we intensify our prayer life by deepening our relationship with God. For some, daily Mass will be added to their schedule, for others, additional time for adoration, and still others the Rosary or the reading of Scripture [or all of these!]. We often take our most intimate relationships for granted. Prayer reminds us of just how blessed we are to have the love of Christ present in our lives.”

Fasting and abstinence make us battle ready to engage in the spiritual combat that is always before us: “We intentionally deny ourselves something we can ‘have’ or ‘do,’” says the Archbishop, “in order to strengthen our will and unite us to Christ. Through our union with Christ’s sufferings, we are in ‘solidarity’ with our brothers and sisters in need.”

Almsgiving, sharing our wealth with those in need, as well as sacrificing our time in serving others, offers us the opportunity to share our blessings with others in and for Christ.

Let us do all these good and holy works in order to make Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection more fruitful and effective in our lives during this holy season.