

First Sunday of Lent Year C: The Devil & Temptation

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After Jesus was baptized by St. John in the Jordan River, He was led by the Holy Spirit to the desert, where He fasted for 40 days as a preparation for His public ministry which would culminate in His suffering, death and resurrection.

This 40 day period is the basis for our time of Lent, which ends with Good Friday and is followed by Easter Sunday.

After having not eaten for forty days, Jesus was weary and hungry; and Satan, not knowing that Jesus was really God who became man, tried to tempt Him.

We know from his questions that Satan thought to Jesus *might* be the Son of God, but he was not really sure; that's why he poses the question, twice, "If you are the Son of God," turn these stones into bread and jump off the top of the temple.

I say that Satan "tried" to tempt Jesus - because in reality, as the God-man, Jesus did not have to struggle as we do to resist the temptations of the devil.

In fact, Jesus must have been laughing to Himself when Satan offered Him all the kingdoms of the world – if Jesus would bow down and worship him.

Why, then, did Jesus allow the devil to try to tempt Him? I think, for two reasons:

First, to teach us that the devil is real, and not some figure of the imagination, or some comic book character dressed in red with a pointed tail and holding a pitchfork.

Satan, and the billions of other demons who are with him in Hell, are fallen angels; that is, they are angels who, through their pride, rebelled against God at the beginning of time; they fell from God's grace and are eternally separated from God.

This brings me to the second point: As fallen angels, Satan and the other fallen angels tempt us; and God, in His loving Providence, permits them to do so.

But God gives to all of us a free will. Satan and all the powers of Hell cannot force us to commit even the smallest venial sin. We can always resist the devil's temptations, with the help of God's grace.

And God will always give us the grace to resist the devil's temptations, provided that we ask for that grace. This requires that we pray - especially in moments of temptations.

As I always tell people, you can't sin and pray at the same time; so when you are tempted, pray, PRAY!

As fallen angels, Satan and his fellow demons hate God, and they are envious of us – that we are destined for eternal happiness in Heaven; and as part of their ongoing rebellion against God, they tempt us to sin so that we will join them in eternal misery, in Hell.

As fallen angels, the devil and his companion demons are *extremely* intelligent. They have been tempting human beings ever since Adam and Eve, and they have been studying our fallen human nature ever since.

Moreover, the devil and his fallen angels study each one of us individually, and they know our weaknesses and the ways in which we are inclined to sin: With some of us it may be pride or vanity and the desire for popularity; with others it may be sins of the flesh; with still others it may be the desire for money or power or material goods.

There is a wonderful book written by the great Christian apologist of the last century, C.S. Lewis, called *The Screwtape Letters*. It contains letters supposedly written by a seasoned demon named Screwtape to a novice demon named Wormwood, giving him advice how to tempt us. It's truly a masterpiece. If you really want to know how the devil thinks, read this book.

Here's some advice Screwtape offers: "Your patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to the fact? Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind and gratifying reflection, 'By jove! I'm being humble,' and almost immediately pride – pride at his own humility – will appear."

As I mentioned earlier, Satan cannot force us to commit even the smallest sin, because we have a free will. So, how does he tempt us? By *suggesting* things to us, placing thoughts in our minds.

Now, we must understand that a thought when it first comes is not a sin; at first, it is only a temptation. Once we realize that we are thinking about something wrong,

once we reflect on the fact that we are having, e.g., a hateful thought, or an impure thought, or a prideful thought, then we have to try to fight against that thought and push it away. And the best way to do this is - what? Yes, to PRAY! – and to *keep praying* as long as the thought continues.

In times of temptation it is very helpful to pray a Hail Mary, or pray to your Guardian Angel – that's what he's there for – to guard us, and give us light and guidance.

One of my favorite prayers in temptation is the prayer to St. Michael the Archangel, in which we ask him to “defend us in battle against the wickedness and snares of the devil” – because we are always engaged in spiritual warfare, as St. Paul says, with not just flesh and blood, but with the principalities and powers, the angels of darkness.

As we continue our journey at the beginning of this Lenten season, I encourage you to use another method of defense against the dark forces of Hell: Examine your conscience. Take a few minutes before bed every night, and ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten you in ways you might have sinned throughout the day: in thought, word, action, or in what you failed to do.

An examination of conscience is an absolutely necessary part of the spiritual life; a necessary means to know ourselves as sinners, to make a worthy confession, and to continue on the path of holiness.

I have ordered booklets which contain the best examination of conscience I have ever seen. The booklets are available on the tables at the entrance ways of the church.

Now, be assured that the devil does NOT want you to read through this booklet with the examination of conscience; he wants you to walk out of church without one.

So, please take one and read through it, and have a blessed and holy Lent!