

Three Parts of Original Sin
1st Sunday of Lent (A)
(Gn 3; Rm 5; Mt 4:1-11)

The first reading recounts the story of the fall, when the Serpent tempted Adam and Eve to sin. The second reading explains what this “Original Sin” is, and how in Adam’s sin “all men have sinned.” And in the Gospel Jesus, taking up his mission as the son of Adam (“Son of Man”) revisits the original temptation of our human nature, confronting the Serpent who brought about the fall, in order to begin the Atonement and Redemption.

There were three temptations in the Original Sin, each of which Jesus experiences in the desert, each of which we also continue to battle through our forty day of Lent, by Fasting, Prayer, and Almsgiving. 1) Eve “saw that the tree “was good for food, so she ate” (Gn 3:6). She was tempted through her appetite. 2) The Serpent promised immortality: “you will not die” (Gn 3:4). 3) Finally, he told them they would be like God (Gn 3:5), i.e., they would be their own gods.

Thus Jesus experiences three temptations in the ruined garden, the wilderness, which reveal more fully what took place in the original paradise.

The FIRST temptation of our human nature, is to satisfy hunger by any means possible. Our flesh has many needs and desires, powerful forces that become destructive when they are not ordered and tempered by grace. As a consequence of the fall, man’s nature was stripped of its completing grace, leaving the appetites disordered and in disarray, tending to fulfill themselves without reason or balance. This intrinsic “tendency to sin” which is a consequence of the fall, is called “concupiscence.”

Thus we overeat, we drink too much, we pamper our body through laziness, we indulge in lust. As we examine this more closely – our addictive and compulsive behaviors which lead us into sin and self-destruction – we find that in every case what is really going on is the attempt to fulfill a spiritual need (the loss of grace) by satisfying the flesh. Our spirit is depressed, so we eat. Our soul is angry, so we drink. Our heart is lonely and empty of love, so we seek physical pleasure. Our mind is resentful, so we do drugs. We look to some kind of physical satisfaction, in order to solve a spiritual problem.

The devil promises short-term pleasures as the solution to life’s bigger sacrifices, something he first did with Adam, again with Jesus, and now with us: “turn these rocks into bread and eat.” Even though it is not truly nourishing and fulfilling, fill your belly with junk; take a short-cut to happiness, satisfy your need impulsively! Why hold back from that which is “pleasing to the eye” and “looks good to eat”? Who does not succumb to this temptation?

Jesus answers him, “*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” Jesus stays physically hungry. He knows that is going to be part of the human condition, and he won’t fall into the trap of the flesh. Avoiding the hunger pangs of physical needs and desires is an “escape.” He teaches instead the difficult path, which is to turn to God. As any 12-step process teaches, our needs and emptiness must be humbly confronted and accepted, not avoided or denied. It is a difficult task, but it is the honest way which leads to true life and well-being: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. When appetites are “out of control” and strongly tempting us, this is a red flag that we have a *spiritual problem* not being dealt with. We would do better to be nourished spiritually, through the word of God, through faith and hope, as Jesus teaches. Man does not live on bread alone, but rather on the true “*Bread that comes down from heaven, which if you eat, you will never hunger*” (Jn 6:33-35).

In our holy season of Lent, it is through Fasting, “giving up” something our appetite “likes,” that we confront our weakness, train our will, and nourish the spirit. Growing spiritually means conquering the flesh (cf. Gal 5:16-17).

The SECOND temptation regards immortality, or *self-preservation*. Besides concupiscence, another consequence of the fall is death: “*by the first man’s sin, death came into the world*” (Rm 5:12). The devil tempts man through his ability to hurt and destroy us.

The devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple parapet and tells him to jump (or is he threatening to push him off?), mocking God’s promise to keep him safe from harm. Man, as a mortal, stands at every moment on the edge of the parapet, on the edge of the cliff, and the devil has great power and ability to push us over (cf. the story of Job). Every one of us is one doctor’s visit away from cancer or some other serious illness. Every one is one car accident away from serious injury or death. Our life is truly fragile, it hangs in a balance; we are here today, but we can be gone tomorrow!

As a result, we want protection, a guarantee of safety. We install burglar alarms on the house; we exercise and buy expensive foods, taking all sorts of vitamins and medicines in the hope that it will stave off illness. We will do anything possible to push that danger of death away from us. And we pray and turn to God for deliverance and protection, for example that beautiful Psalm 91 which the devil quotes in mockery: “*God will send you his angel to deliver and protect you, lest you stump your foot on a stone*” (Ps 91:11-14).

Implicit in the Serpent’s words to Adam and Eve (“you will not die if you commit this sin”) is a *threat* (“do this, or I will kill you”). Self-preservation is a

great temptation. And “deliverance from evil” is fundamental theme of religion: why we pray, why we offer sacrifice to “the gods.” There is a reason the devil brings Jesus specifically to the *temple*: how many people seek God and start praying seriously precisely when they are losing their life, and everything is in disarray? But Jesus teaches that God is not manipulated: “*You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.*” We should not treat God as the one whose job it is to get us out of difficult messes, nor should we become angry with God when bad things happen, as if it’s His fault. It is the devil who corrupts religion in this way, and turns it into a form of superstition.

We do pray in the Lord’s prayer for God to “*deliver us from evil,*” but this means first of all the evil one. The greatest “evil” is not death, the greatest “good” is not self-preservation. “*He who loves his life in this world will lose it, but he who hates his life in this world will preserve it for the next*” (Jn 12:25).

During Lent, it is PRAYER that helps us develop a true relationship with God, built on love and holy fear of ever attempting to put God to the test. Like Job, we will remain faithful even in the midst of the devil’s efforts to cast doubts upon God’s goodness.

The THIRD temptation regards power and dominion. The devil offers Jesus all the nations, the whole world. Who of us does not like the “world at our fingertips?” Who of us does not want enough money so that we can have and do what we like? And who does not like to be worshipped and adored – appreciated – by others? The devil offers all power, beginning with the attitude that says we will make our own rules, and set our own terms, deciding for ourselves what is “wrong” and “right.” By bowing to Mammon as our god, we are bowing to him.

Jesus says, “*The Lord alone shall you worship; Him alone shall you serve.*” Though it was offered to him (Jn 6:15), Jesus rejected political power. He lived poor, and even though he had large crowds following him, he rebuffed them with teachings they did not want to hear (Jn 6:66). In the end he was rejected, mocked, hated, and even betrayed by one of his friends. God alone shall you serve!

It is Almsgiving and the spirituality of stewardship that teaches us we are not masters but servants of the Master, responsible to the needs of others who are entrusted to our care. Almsgiving frees us from ourselves, and turns us from selfish “takers” into generous “givers.”

In these forty days, let us go with Christ into the desert, leaving the old Adam and seeking the new. Let us not be deceived by false promises. Let our prayer be sincere, our fasting real, and our almsgiving generous.