

The Great Temptation
Passion Sunday (A)
(Mt 26-27; Phi 2:6-11)

When he disobeyed and rejected God who is infinite, Adam committed an infinite offense, incurring a debt of sin for mankind that is impossible to pay. Moreover, he did so freely, exercising the will by which he was “like God.” If God were simply to forgive this debt and restore Adam to his former condition, it would negate man’s freedom. Were God to somehow “forgive” or “pay off” Adam’s freely incurred debt out of pity or love for this creature, God would violate His own justice and truth, the very terms under which the Serpent brought about the offense.

Thus, man is trapped by an infinite debt of sin, but God cannot dig him out of the predicament: it is man’s responsibility, and his alone. In light of this impossible dilemma, the great fathers and doctors of the Church explain the reason for the Incarnation.¹ God would redeem man (i.e., “buy him back” by paying his debt), and satisfy the infinite debt of justice which God alone is capable of paying. But God would not violate His principle of justice, since Man will be the one paying it, as is right and just. God would pay the debt as man.

This is the divine plan, outlined and foretold in the Scriptures: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.” He will pay the price of sin with His own life, that is, with his Blood. On the night of his death, taking up the chalice, Jesus says, “This is the blood of the New and Everlasting Covenant. It will be shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:27-28).

By means of the Incarnation, God enters a New and Everlasting “marriage covenant” with His creation, and with man in particular. By means of the Redemption, this marriage is consummated.² What begins with the Incarnation, is sealed with the blood of Jesus on Calvary. Unlike the previous covenants which were sealed with the blood of bulls and goats, this time God is able to seal it in His own Blood, since God has come “in person.” Everything He was preparing for since the first sin, is now brought to fulfillment.

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the sacrifice that atones for the sin of the world. By this sacrifice, Jesus “pays the price” for Original sin and overcomes the Devil.

¹ In treatises such as *De Incarnatione* (“On the Incarnation”) by St. Athanasius (295-373) and *Cur Deus Homo* (“Why God Became Man”) by St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), the great fathers and doctors of the Church explain man’s predicament of Original Sin, and God’s answer in the Incarnation. .

² A covenant is a promise that binds two parties to each other, sealed in blood, that is, one’s life. Blood is the very life-essence of a creature. Substitute the word “life” for “blood,” and one can appreciate the Biblical significance of blood (cf. Lv 17:14).

At the very spot where the Garden of Eden once existed, where there once stood an important “tree,” where the Devil once accosted the first humans and tempted them into disobedience, Jesus Christ as the New Adam faces the great temptation but remains obedient. Though he is never mentioned among all the various people whose roles are highlighted in the Passion account, the Devil is the hidden protagonist of the plot. In the crucifixion, Jesus is actually confronting the Serpent at the Tree of Sin, in order to destroy sin at its origin. It is the evil one, using the same terminology as the Temptation in the Desert (Mt 4:3,6), who tempts and mocks Jesus on Calvary: *“If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross”* (Mt 27:40).

Adam sinned not simply from pride and the desire to be god, but because he was under threat from the Devil, who was tempting him to keep his life at the cost of obedience to God...

Being aware of how supremely intimidating or threatening the Devil is -- “a great dragon, with seven heads and ten horns” (Rv 12:3) -- we begin to hear the sarcasm of his promise to Eve, that “you will not die” if you eat the fruit of the tree. It is a threat! In those dark circumstances, Eve has a powerful motivation for seeing how “the fruit looks good to eat.” The Devil puts pressure on Adam by holding a gun to Eve’s head. He is offering them their lives, but on his terms, which requires disobedience to God and the exaltation of self. The serpent brings this pressure to bear upon Adam by threatening him with violent and brutal death, the idea of which is fearsome to man in the state of paradise.

It is Christ’s death which sheds more light on the original temptation of Adam and Eve, long veiled in the symbolic and mysterious language of biblical prophecy. In the logic of the Redemption, the circumstances of the Fall will be mirrored in the parallel actions taken by Christ to undo the Fall.

Jesus always called himself the “Son of Man.” This is because he was the New Adam (Rm 5:12-21, 1 Cor 15:21-22,45-50), ready to return to man’s tragic moment and face the Devil on his behalf, as man. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). On a tree, in the very place sin was committed, the “Son of Man” (i.e., “Son of Adam”) sacrifices his life in obedience to the Father for the sake of his Bride, rather than become master of his human life on the Devil’s terms.

The temptation to escape death at any cost began powerfully during the agony in the Garden: “My soul is sorrowful to death; Father if it is possible let this cup pass me by...” (Mt 26:38-39). Jesus sweat blood as he experienced the power of the Evil One over humanity (Lk 22:44). But Jesus remained obedient: “Father, not my will, but your will be done” (Mt 26:42).

In the second reading, St. Paul sings eloquently of this obedience and humility of the New Adam in the face of temptation and brutal death (Phi 2:6-11):

*“Though he was in the form of God,
Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in the likeness of men.
And being found in human form he humbled himself
and became obedient unto death,
even death on a Cross.*

*Therefore God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father!”*

This beautiful hymn of Christ’s humble obedience, is the direct inversion of the tragic “hymn” one might sing regarding Adam’s prideful disobedience:

*“Though he was in the human form,
Man deemed equality with God something to be grasped at,
and preserved himself, taking the form of a god,
reborn in the likeness of Lucifer.
Thus exalting himself in pride,
he became disobedient,
avoiding death at the tree.*

*Therefore God has cast him down and banished him,
giving him the name “mud,” (Adam)
so that man should be subjected to every power,
in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth.
and under the curse of death
return in ignominy to the dust from which he came.*

During this Holy Week, let us go with the Lord to suffer and die, so that through his great victory we might pass from death to life, and obtain salvation.