

1 Lent A 2020 SML
MT 4:1-11

The great characteristic of our age is certainly not its love of religion. It may be its love of talking about religion. There are many a former altar boy who see me in my collar and love to talk about their days serving the 6:00 a.m. Mass, but haven't been to Church in years. From a thousand laptops, from a thousand microphones, from a thousand videos, we have heard it repeated and repeated and repeated, that the acid of today has eaten away faith and morality, and that modern man must have a "new" religion to suit the spirit of this "new age" in which we live.

This new religion, we are told, must be absolutely different from anything that ever existed before. It must be fresh and modern and as brilliant as the age in which we live, with its:

- ✓ new hopes,
- ✓ new visions and
- ✓ new dreams.

And when we inquire into the characteristics of this new religion, empirical data shows this new religion:

- ✓ must be social,
- ✓ it must be worldly,

- ✓ and it must be political.

By social, I mean it must dedicate itself, not to the abstract pursuit of the Holy Spirit, but to the pragmatic needs of the body. The religious man of this new religion will give bread to the hungry and drink to the thirsty and clothes to the naked and his job will be over and done with, without any thought to faith, grace and sacraments.

Next, this new religion will be known for its worldliness, which in a way, goes back to the first characteristic. For too long, religion has been way too focused on God and our responsibilities toward Him, instead of service to our fellow man . . . why? Because modern man is too busy to think about his sins.

The final characteristic of this new religion must be political, and by that, I mean that religion needs to stop talking about the Kingdom of God in the public square. This new religion can exercise freedom of worship, which means you are free to “worship,”

- ✓ over there
- ✓ in that building
- ✓ behind those closed doors
- ✓ and behind those walls,

as opposed to “freedom of religion,” which means you are free to live your religion wherever you like.

So let us ask these new prophets the obvious question. How new is this new religion? Because, if you go back 2000 years to Our Blessed Lord and today’s gospel, you will learn that the new religion is just an old temptation.

With baptismal waters still dripping from His Divine Head, Our Blessed Lord went into solitude and put a desert between Himself and humanity. For 40 years the chosen people wandered in the desert before entering the Promised Land. For 40 days Moses remained on the mountain to receive the Law on tablets of stone. And here, before announcing the Kingdom, to which both the chosen people and Moses had pointed, Our Blessed Lord retired for 40 days of fasting and to be tempted by Satan. And whatever you do, don’t mock the Gospel and say there is no Satan. Satan just loves it when he hears people say that the devil does not exist. So let’s not give the devil his due.

Satan first tempted Our Lord to make religion social. “Tell these stoned to become loaves of bread.” It was Satan’s challenge to God to make religion center around the material. To which Our Blessed Lord responded, “No. Not by bread

alone does man live, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Our Blessed Lord’s response is religion is not social, insofar as its primary function is to give food for the body. Its primary function is to give food for the soul. Yes, men must have bread. There’s no disputing that. Our Blessed Lord taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” and He multiplied the loaves and fishes to excess. But religion is not purely social. A religion that makes securing bread its chief objective, while not providing spiritual food, will starve with hunger in the midst of plenty. Feeding the poor is part and parcel of our ministry, but it is not the primary part as Satan would have us believe.

Satan’s next temptation was an effort to make religion worldly. The plea to cast Himself down from the pinnacle was not a sign of trust in God, but disbelief in God, that God is indifferent and just plain not interested. You throw yourself down and God will watch you hit the pavement. Jesus’ answer, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God” is a stark reminder that religion is not about falling bodies, but responsible persons endowed with free will.

Satan’s last assault was to make religion political, by exchanging the Kingdom of God for the kingdoms of earth.

“The Lord your God shall you worship, and Him alone shall you adore” declares

- ✓ that patriotism is not the highest virtue,
 - ✓ that nationalism is not the highest worship,
 - ✓ that the State is not the highest good.
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- ✓ Devotion to the state there must be;
 - ✓ loyalties to the kingdoms of earth there must be;
 - ✓ tribute to Caesar there must be.

Man is social, and living in society, man must govern and be governed. But Satan would have Christ adore the kingdoms of earth and he would have man adore the kingdoms of earth over the Kingdom of Heaven, when in fact right order is the other way around. It has long been understood that conscience is first formed by God. Otherwise, there would never be such a thing as conscientious objection. So render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, but render to God the things that are God's.

Thus the so-called new religion proves to be nothing more than the old religion which Satan would have liked to establish on earth 2000 years ago. And once you realize that, perhaps the minds of today will begin to see that our problems are not

primarily social, worldly and political, but religious and moral;
that society cannot be reformed from without, before its
members are reformed from within.