

# Christ's Temptations and Ours

by *Fr. Roger J. Landry*

## DESCRIPTION

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1) The episode in today's Gospel is particularly special, because the only way the evangelists would have known about it would have been if Christ had told it to his disciples himself. No one else was there. The Lord must have opened up his heart to them about this seminal moment in his autobiography, which occurred immediately (Mk 1:12) after he was baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit led him into the huge fifteen-by-thirty-five mile desert between the mountain of Jerusalem and the Dead Sea so that he could pray to the Father about the public ministry which he was about to commence. He prayed and fasted for an incredible forty days, which obviously would have left him physically weak and infamished. It was at this moment that the Devil came to him to tempt him. Much like God the Father had once allowed Job to be tested, the same Father allowed his Son to be tempted. In the temptations Jesus suffered and later described to his disciples, the devil brought out in a pristine form the types of temptation that Christ would undergo in his public ministry and that each of us undergoes in our lives. By focusing on how Christ responded, we, too, can learn how to react to the various temptations we encounter.

2) The first temptation was aimed right at Jesus' tremendous hunger: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of Bread." When the Israelites were in the desert, Satan successfully tempted them to grumble to God to feed them (Ex 16:3ff). Satan was tempting Jesus to recapitulate the Israelites' lack of trust in God. Jesus would have nothing of it. Satan, moreover, was trying to tempt Jesus away from his mission. Jesus had come to save people, to feed their most important hunger — the hunger of their souls — and Satan was trying to induce the Lord to become a baker rather than a Savior. To feed people's physical hunger would be a great way to win a crowd and become popular. As

Jesus himself realized after feeding the five-thousand men with the multiplication of the five loaves and two fish, great crowds followed him, "not because [they] saw signs, but because [they] ate [their] fill of the loaves" (Jn 6:26). Hunger is the most basic human need and Satan was tempting Christ to bribe others to follow him. But Jesus himself was already living off a greater source of food and was preparing to train disciples to seek this same celestial nutrition: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." This same insight he passed on to the crowds when they were following him to have their stomachs satiated: "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."

3) All of us in the Church need to remember what this greatest food source of all is. There is no shortage of people who live by their stomachs alone. The American people elected Herbert Hoover president in 1928 on his motto, "A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage." While the slogans have changed, often times we do not think much higher. The most important factor in the last few presidential elections — even among Catholic voters, as we see in exit polls — has been the economy, who we think will put more money in our pockets and allow us to put more food on the table. The larger spiritual issues, about whether a candidate opposes the slaughter of unborn innocents or wants to celebrate it as a civil right, about whether a candidate will set a good moral example or a bad one, often are pushed to the side. Even within the Church, sometimes Catholics will make all types of sacrifices to meet their own or others' material needs, but do very little to try to address their own or others' greater spiritual needs. Lent is the time Christ calls us all to resist that temptation and to seek first this heavenly food and live by it, trusting that, as he promised, everything else will be given to us besides (Mt 6:33).

4) In the second temptation, the devil presented Jesus with a vision of all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority if you will worship me." Jesus was preparing to become the King of Kings, the Lord of heaven and earth, but that was going to happen through humility and the Cross. The devil was proposing a short cut, another way, an easier way. "I'll give it all to you if you fall down and worship me." The devil had gotten the Israelites in the desert to succumb to this temptation to worship him in a golden calf, rather than to trust in the God with whom Moses was speaking on the mountain. But he failed with Jesus, who said to him, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone."

5) This is the temptation to compromise our relationship with God, with the truth, with the principles that flow from God, in order to get ahead or to get what we want. Oftentimes the devil disguises these temptations in terms of the pursuit of power, privilege or prestige. Candidates for political office will give in to the

temptation to compromise the principles of faith in order to get elected or re-elected. Students in school will cheat on exams to get a better grade. Those who are gifted with the ability to speak well will use their charm to "get away" with things or to seduce others. Those who are smart will succumb to the temptation to lord it over and dominate others rather than to serve them. It is a perennial temptation to seek to achieve something worldly by compromising our relationship with God and his moral law, to serve the "ruler of this world" rather than the one, true God. Jesus passed on to his disciples this second struggle he faced so that we could learn from him that we are called to worship the Lord our God and serve him alone.

6) In the third temptation, the devil tried to tempt Jesus to test God the Father. He even misused Sacred Scripture to do so: "Throw yourself down from [this pinnacle], for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone' (cf. Ps 91)." The devil had succeeded in getting the Israelites to test God while they were in the desert. He got them to complain that Moses had brought them out into the desert to kill them and their children of thirst, and they were about ready to kill Moses. They said, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Ex 17:1-7). Jesus didn't succumb to the same temptation. He replied, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

7) This is the temptation to be presumptuous with God, to do things that will try to force God's hand. We try to coerce the Father into protecting us no matter what. By this temptation, the devil tries to get us to recreate our relationship with God on our terms rather than His terms; then, when God doesn't seem to respond to that situation because such behavior harms us, the devil uses it to divide us even further from God. Some of us can smoke a pack of cigarettes a day for several decades and then expect God to cure us of lung cancer simply because we ask him nicely in prayer. Some students can blow off their studies all semester and then expect God to help them get a good grade on their exams. We can all put ourselves repeatedly in a near occasion of sin and then expect God to save us from the consequences of the slippery slope into serious sin that results. Again and again the devil tries to tempt us to do something reckless and make us expect God to rescue us from it every time. Jesus passed onto his disciples his response to the devil's temptation, so that we could make it our own: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Rather than dig a hole and expect God to get us out of it, Jesus says, don't dig the hole. Rather than risk physical or spiritual injury and expect God to prevent the harm, don't take those reckless risks.

8) The last line of today's Gospel says that the Devil subjected Jesus to "every test" (v. 13), but Jesus never succumbed. In one of the most beautiful lines in Sacred Scripture, the letter to the Hebrews tells us, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every

respect has been tested as we are, yet never sinned" (Heb 4:15). The devil exists and he is trying to tempt us in every way away from God, away from our mission, away from our vocation and dignity. Jesus, however, knows what we're going through and has taught us the way to overcome these temptations, by imitating him and his responses. Lent is a time when we are called to live these responses of Jesus.

9) Some demons, Jesus tells us in St. Mark's Gospel, are expunged "only by prayer and fasting" (Mk 9:29). That is why, every Lent, the Church, to strengthen us, presents before us the need for us to pray and to fast. Since the devil always tries to trick us by tempting us selfishly to disorder our relationship to things (the first temptation, to misuse material things like bread), to others (the second temptation, to have power over others) and to God (third temptation, through the sin of presumption), that is why the Church also beckons us to give alms generously, by which we overcome selfishness and USE the gifts God has given us love him and love others. The practices of Lent are a remedy to the temptations of the Evil One.

10) St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, wrote, "In order to be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, put on the whole armor of God." Prayer, fasting and almsgiving help us to do just that, because they help us to "put on Christ" (Rom 13:14), who himself prayed unceasingly, who fasted for 40 days, who gave himself until his last drop of blood. The discipline that Lent requires of us helps to keep us vigilant against the devil, by conforming us to Christ in faith. St. Peter instructed us, "Discipline yourselves and keep alert. The devil is prowling like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith." The devil exists and he is real. He seeks to devour us. But Christ has overcome him and we will, too, provided that we put on God's armor, discipline ourselves as a disciple should, and remain vigilant. Lent is an annual spiritual boot camp the Church gives us so that we might train, yet again, to be victorious in this most important battle we'll ever fight.

11) "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus refused to change a stone into bread for the devil; but for us, his beloved flock, he is about to change bread into his own flesh and blood. He is the word that comes from the mouth of God and now that God wants to put that Word in our mouths. Let us not presumptuously tempt God by receiving him and then going out and live in a way incompatible with the Gift we receive. Let us, rather, "worship Him, the Lord our God, and serve Him alone."

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you. Because by your Holy Cross, you have redeemed the world!