

Readings First Sunday of Lent

2 Corinthians 6: 1-10

Brethren, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says: "In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you." Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We cause no one to stumble in anything, in order that no fault may be found with our ministry; on the contrary, in everything, we commend ourselves as ministers of God, through much endurance, in afflictions, hardships, constraints, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, vigils, fasts; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, in a holy spirit, in unfeigned love, in truthful speech, in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness at the right and at the left; through glory and dishonor, insult and praise. We are treated as deceivers and yet are truthful; as unrecognized and yet acknowledged; as dying and behold we live; as chastised and yet not put to death; as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor yet enriching many; as having nothing and yet possessing all things.

Matthew 4: 1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards, he was hungry. The tempter approached and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." He said in reply, "It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and made him stand on the parapet of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you' and 'with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.'" Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him, "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." At this, Jesus said to him, "Get away, Satan! It is written: 'The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.'" Then the devil left him and behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Stepping Stones, Not Stumbling Blocks

First Sunday of Lent – 2 Cor. 6: 1-10 / Mt. 4: 1-11

Ave Maria Catholic Church, February 26, 2023 - Fr. David M Vidal

The gospel of the temptations in the desert unveils a fundamental aspect of our life here on earth. As we enter the world, we begin a fight for something greater than this world. We fight for goodness, truth, beauty, love, purity, and in a few words, for the kingdom of God in our lives.

The fight is real, and in this fight, we have friends and enemies. Our primordial enemy is the first deceiver and accuser of humanity: the devil. He is a powerful angel, however, with limited power. As Saint Augustine teaches: *“The devil is tied up like a dog with chains; he may bark, but he cannot bite unless one puts himself within a reach of his teeth,”* (Sermo. 197).

The devil is the first instigator. He wants to drag us into the same misery in which he put himself. He wants to bring us to a state of separation and enmity with God. But temptations not only come from the devil; they also come from a corrupted world that lost the fundamental order to God. Finally, temptations also come from our fallen and wounded nature that is inclined to what is easy and pleasant without considering the goodness or malice of actions.

One thing is certain: temptations do not come from God. The Apostle James teaches: *“Let no man say, when he is tempted, that he is tempted by God,”* (James, 1: 13). However, God allows us to be tempted by our spiritual enemies, and at the same time, He gives us the necessary graces to resist temptations. This is what St. Paul explains in his first letter to the Corinthians: *“God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able,”* (1 Cor 10: 13).

What are temptations?

Temptations are illusions. They are fantasies without real weight. They are lies. They present objects, people, actions, thoughts, images, and countless other things as if they were the ultimate reason for our existence when in truth, they are not.

If we measure things properly, we will see that in this world, everything passes away, and so it is that we entered this world for something greater than this world.

Temptations are disrespectful propositions. We are created to be children of God and God’s friends. We are called to have an eternal conversation with God and to welcome Him as our eternal guest into our hearts. We are invited to enjoy the eternal feast of heaven.

However, temptations offer us filth and manures that are wrapped in shiny paper and attractive colors in exchange for our highest end. That is disrespectful!

Temptations are atheistic propositions. They ignore the Creator. Even more, they deny the Creator. That is an act of foolishness! As we read in Psalm 14:1: “*The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’*” Temptations deny the ultimate author of goodness, truth, beauty, love, and of everything that is worthy of praise.

However, God, in his infinite wisdom and power, turns the evil of temptations into a source of goodness.

Temptations are not meant to be stumbling blocks on our way. Temptations must be stepping stones, only if we know how to use them well.

First, temptations help us to know ourselves.

In moments of peace and spiritual consolation, it is hard to know where we truly are. Do we truly love God, or do we love the prosperity that we enjoy? Do we truly love God, or do we love more the things of this world that God gives us? In a few words, do we truly love God? As difficult as it is to give an answer to this question, temptations impel us to define ourselves. Are we with God or against God? In moments of temptation, we know ourselves. We know what we love.

Second, temptations purify us.

Temptations purify our souls from self-love. When the time of temptation comes, we realize that we cannot trust in ourselves and that we must cry to God: Help me! When the violence of the temptation is extreme; when we see no way of escape, then, seeing no hope in ourselves and having no further defense, we must throw ourselves into the arms of God. This is just the moment God has been waiting for, and He is ready to receive us with open arms, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son. God allowed that to happen, precisely to show us that He alone can save us from destruction.

Third, temptations are instruments of spiritual progress.

In moments of temptations and trials, we realize that greater energy and determination are required from us. Perhaps, we are satisfied with our lukewarm actions; perhaps, we are happy with ourselves, too happy, and so we neglect to see how necessary it is to advance and go beyond our comfort zone.

In moments of temptation, we realize that we are not as good as we thought and that there is much work for us. We will never reach a high degree of purity, faith, hope, and love for God and our neighbor unless we are strongly exercised in these virtues.

When the devil seeks to rob our virtues, they become even dearer to us, and we make greater efforts to keep them.

Finally, temptations are a school of love.

God allows his friends to be tempted. The book of Tobit (12:13) says: *“Because you were acceptable to God, it was necessary that temptation should prove you.”* And Saint Ignatius of Loyola teaches: *“Sometimes God wishes to try us (or we can say, allows temptation) in order to see how much we are worth, or how much we love,”* (*Spiritual Exercises*).

And *“God will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able,”* (1 Cor 10:13). If we turn to God with confidence in our time of need, and do not abandon Him, He will never abandon us.

The devil wants to harm us and turn us away from God. However, God's intention is to strengthen us and make us advance in virtue, by the very things by which we are tempted. The grace God gives us is always sufficient to assure us victory, and even make us always superior to the enemy.

With confidence in God, let us renew once again our petition: *“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,”* Amen.