

Last week's bulletin article took up some of the first words we hear at the very beginning of Lent: Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return. Now if someone does "remember" – in the way described last week – the next question is probably going to be: what must I do to reach everlasting life and avoid everlasting misery? What must I do to not waste my life, to fulfill the purpose of this life? The focus of the entire liturgical year, of all teachings, sacraments, and devotional practices is aimed at exactly that question. The season of Lent, however, is aimed at the most basic, fundamental work that leads to perfect and everlasting happiness. That which Lent focuses is not the end, but it is the only beginning, it can't be skipped. Sorrow has to be felt for those who believe otherwise, for those who do not embrace that which Lent focuses on. It is a delusion, a self-deception, to believe otherwise. The Lord wills our salvation, which is why there's a Lenten season.

So what is this focus of Lent? The Church herself brings it out in a number of ways, especially with the readings for Mass and with an emphasis on certain devotional practices. We will start, then, with the readings for the First Sunday of Lent, which present the temptations of Christ. This Gospel provides an opportunity to reiterate a little about temptation. St Thomas Aquinas notes the timing of these temptations – they are right after the baptism of our Lord when a voice from Heaven was heard saying: this is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. So the order of these events is: Baptism-Sonship-Temptations. The order is the same for us. Aquinas quotes the Book of Sirach (the inspired Word of God) here: Son, if you will be a follower of the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation. How often people want to deny temptation, trying to convince themselves, perhaps, that they are a good person or are beyond temptation or some such thing. Our Lord Himself faced temptation and yet we want to say that we are so good as to be beyond it?! There are only 2 kingdoms in the end: the Kingdom of Heaven which is for the sons and daughters of our Lord, and the Kingdom of hell, and those that would be sons and daughters of God face temptation. The saints faced temptation. St Francis of Assisi, for example, threw himself into some thorn bushes once to rid himself of a temptation to lust. If you are going to be a son or daughter in our Father's Kingdom, expect temptation and face it.

Are the sons of Satan not tempted? It's not exactly true that those hardened by pride or greed or whatever it might be don't experience temptation. It's rather that they have become so hardened that the tempter doesn't have to spend much time on them, they are more or less on autopilot, an autopilot that is leading to hell. A little maintenance on those is enough. The main point, however, that our Lord is making is not that those who are hardened against Him do not experience temptation. It is rather that His sons and daughters *will* face temptation; being a follower of our Lord won't be happy-happy easy street. Too often when people begin to enter into conversion, they expect that to be the case. The Lord is saying: no, now you can expect real struggle.

We can further clarify this question by considering what it means to *face* temptation. To face temptation does not just mean to experience it. A person can experience temptation and follow it gleefully without the slightest thought of not following it. Facing temptation means recognizing and acknowledging that it is something wrong and then engaging in the interior struggle to deny it.

But why does our Lord permit temptation for those who want to follow Him? It is not such a hard thing to understand. What is the essence of Heaven? It is union with God, relation with God, seeing the beloved face-to-face and being thrilled by that, not unlike that between spouses (or newlyweds) in a good marriage. It is a relation of love but in order for us to experience God's love as Heaven – as ultimate fulfillment – it has to be mutual, just like in human relations. Suppose a young man likes a young lady but she does not return his affection, it is not mutual. Is this a fulfilling relation for either of them? Of course not. Then how could one-sided love be fulfilling in the case of God? God is always faithful, He cannot be otherwise. The question is our love for Him. But how can I love Him? How can I possibly give Him, who has no needs, anything? As we have said many times before, the language of love is sacrifice of self. Why temptation, then? Because it is an opportunity now for me to love the Lord, not just with words or good feelings but by acts of love, by denying my own desires, thus reciprocating God's love with my own. The interior fight to reject temptation is the first and most basic act of self-denial, act of love, towards God. There is only reason to fight temptation – out of love for our Lord, because I want to do something great, all that I can, for the Beloved. To just want easy street

and seek the bare minimum is not love, or at least it is a very weak one. Suppose you did this with your spouse? Suppose a wife said: well what's the bare minimum I have to do to keep the old man from grumbling? Would you say: wow, that's great, that's the kind of marriage I want?! Sirach said: if you will be a son of God, prepare yourself for temptation; we could also say: if you want greatness, prepare yourself for temptation.

Lent focuses on the most basic act of love for our Lord: purification from sin, the struggle against temptation. It can't be skipped. Without this, there is no sincere love of our Lord, there is no Heaven.

Everything that our Lord does or permits for us is for our true good, which includes allowing temptation. The core, basic reason is to give us an opportunity to love Him. Aquinas, though, expands on this giving 5 specific things that temptation does for us, and we will touch on at least a couple of those. One, Aquinas says, is that it helps maintain and grow the virtue of humility. He derives this from Sacred Scripture, specifically one of the letters of St Paul who said that the Lord allowed an angel of Satan (i.e., a demon) to "beat him" so that he might not grow arrogant because of the revelations God had given him. Humility is the most fundamental of virtues; there can be love of God without it because without it, I think that I'm God! Aquinas also points out that temptation increases our self-knowledge, as well as knowledge of God. Pope St Peter gives us a good example of this. He swore he would never deny the Lord and, in spite of our Lord warning him, he did just that. By allowing this temptation to come to Peter, our Lord imparted to Him greater self-knowledge, which leads to greater purification, and increased his humility. It strengthens us as well – you can surely see this in your own life. The first time you are put in a difficult position of any kind, you feel uneasy and maybe fail. But when you face the same thing again, you are more prepared and stronger. But one thing that temptation does that we probably wouldn't think of is that it shows us our dignity. Dogs are not tempted because they cannot be sons of the Father. The Father honors us by placing us in "the fight," not unlike an athlete who is honored by his coach when he is placed in the big game, the great struggle.

If we are to face this great interior struggle against temptation, we need to be able to recognize temptation and have a little bit of understanding of how it operates. Pope St Gregory the Great points out that there are 3 stages of temptation-sin: Suggestion, Delight, Consent. First the suggestion is made. Our Lord and Holy Mother would have experienced suggestion only externally – which the Gospel accounts bring out. For us, affected by temptation, the suggestion can be either external or internal (in our thoughts). The external suggestions are numerous, especially with all of the media available today – the internet, social media, the entertainment industry and so on. Be aware of it. Another good question for us is: how do I serve as a suggestion to others? Through my example, maybe? Through immodesty? It is helpful to fix these stages in our mind. If we don't remember that temptation starts with suggestion, how can we ever face it? To get into the habit of saying: this is a suggestion to sin, is a significant part of carrying out this great and fundamental act of love of our Lord. Then comes delight which, Aquinas points out, is the beginning of sin. With delight (i.e., I want to do it, I like the idea) I've already started moving towards full consent. This comes out in the temptation of Eve. This is why St Francis threw himself in the thorn bushes to drive out the temptation. Cut it off at the suggestion. If we get to the point of delight, the struggle is often lost.

In the space left here, let us introduce something that comes out at the end of last Sunday's Gospel which says something peculiar: When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time. *Every* temptation?? There were only 3 and I could surely think of considerably more! Furthermore, I'm pretty sure I've never been tempted to go up on the parapet of the Temple and jump off! Yet, the Gospel says that there is some sort of completeness or totality in the temptations of Christ. How so? The Church fathers, St Augustine for example, have addressed this question. Based on the first letter of John, the Church has long understood that temptations fall into one of 3 general categories, what St John the Apostle calls: Lust of the eyes, Lust of the flesh, and the Pride of Life. The 3 particular temptations of Christ represent these categories. This is very helpful in examination of conscience but we will have to return to the meaning of each another time.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*