

Lent I

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“And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of
God.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

In 1988, a film premiered in this country which provoked great ire amongst religious leaders across the denominational spectrum. Jerry Falwell, a co-founder of the Moral Majority, called the film “libelous” and “slanderous”; Mother Angelica, the feisty foundress of the Roman Catholic EWTN television network, said it was “sacrilegious” and “blasphemous”; Blockbuster video stores refused to carry it; the city of Savannah, GA banned it from theaters; and the Vatican placed the novel upon which this movie was based on its Index of Forbidden Books. Today, the film is still officially banned in Singapore and the Philippines.

Martin Scorsese’s “The Last Temptation of Christ” had clearly struck a nerve. The film portrays a Christ-figure struggling mightily against inner demons of doubt, depression, and lust. In its penultimate scene, Christ is lured away from the cross by the devil and chooses wedded life with Mary Magdalene rather than face the horrors of crucifixion necessary for the salvation of mankind.

Though the film is pedantic—and cheapens, rather than elevates, Christ’s humanity—the controversy it generated raises a question fundamental to Christian doctrine, and yet all-too-often entirely misunderstood in popular American religion: “what does it mean to say, as we heard in the Gospel this morning, that Our Lord was *tempted*?”

Before we can answer this question, however, I need briefly to take you back to your catechism classes. In the first place, we must understand, as St. James tells us, that “God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man”—because sin, at its root, is a denial of God’s very nature and person; it is thus impossible that God could deny himself. Secondly, Our Lord, the incarnate Son of God, is fully divine and perfectly human, these two natures being joined in one Divine Person, Jesus Christ. The Divine Nature of Our Lord, eternally God, is incapable of sinning; likewise, Our Lord’s human nature is not that of fallen Adam—liable to concupiscence and sin—but rather is perfected human nature, entirely pure and completely transformed by his Divinity. Christ, a divine Person, perfect Man united to perfect God, is therefore what St. Augustine termed *non posse peccare*: not able to sin; and indeed, as the head of reborn humanity, Christ’s inability to sin is the anticipation and promise of our own future inability to sin when, after our purgation and healing are complete, we will have been glorified in the life of the world to come.

So if our Lord is by his very nature unable to sin, what exactly is happening in today's Gospel?

If we read the account of Christ's temptation in context, we will see that it follows forthwith upon the story of Our Lord's baptism, which we heard a few weeks ago on the second Sunday after the Epiphany. It is interesting to note that the very same Spirit who alighted upon Christ at his baptism, testifying to his true identity as the incarnate Son of God, then immediately leads him into the desert so that he may be "tempted" of the devil. This is not, however, the first time in Scripture that the Holy Ghost has driven God's chosen one into the wilderness. You will recall that in the account of Moses and the Exodus, God reveals his Name—his identity—to Moses and to Pharaoh, and then puts the gods of Egypt to the test by the working of plagues, demonstrating the powerlessness of those demonic gods in the face of the one True God of Israel. Immediately after this revelation of God's nature, the Holy Ghost in the form of a pillar of fire, leads the Hebrews through the sea out into the wilderness. But after time passes, and the journey to Canaan increasingly seems interminable, they begin to grumble, and quickly forget the identity of the God who saved them. They demand supernatural food to be given them in the desert, as a test of his power; they question his ability to bring them in safety to the promised land; and finally they blaspheme him by committing sacrilege in the worship of false, demonic idols,

preferring the kingdoms of the world over the kingdom of God. As the psalmist warns us concerning them: “To-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts ... as in the day of temptation in the wilderness; when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works.”

The Hebrews of old did not tempt God with sin; they tempted him—that is, they put him to the test—to prove whether God really was who God claimed to be. And thus today’s Gospel: Satan, the accuser, who deceived Adam by questioning Adam’s true identity as a son of God, promising him something greater by appeal to his pride, confronts *the* Son of God in the wilderness: only—and this is key—Satan does not know for sure who Christ really is. “If thou be the Son of God.” The late Msgr. Ronald Knox, English priest and scripture translator, remarks: “The whole story of the Temptation is misconceived if we do not recognize that it was an attempt made by Satan to find out whether our Lord was the Son of God or not.” Christ cannot be tempted to sin, but he can be tempted to prove his reveal identity before the appointed time, to announce a victory not yet accomplished, to disclose himself to the enemy. Satan, who it must be remembered is a created being, subject to natural limitations, and by no means possessing all knowledge, is putting God to the test, just as the Jews before him. Satan is so devoid of truth that he is unable to recognize Truth himself standing before him. Our Lord never

answers Satan's question, but deflects by quoting Scripture at him: the very same Scriptures given as warnings to the Israelites after they put God to the test in the wilderness.

Our Lord's temptation in the desert is a question of *identity*. The desert in Scripture always represents the place of chaos, of sin, where wild beasts roam and demons rule. Christ goes into the desert not to lord his divine power over Satan, but to trick him, on his own turf, into believing the Son of God to be only human, so that Christ might triumph over the devil as a man. Christ, camouflaged in flesh, takes up the battle lost by Adam, using Satan's own tactics against him—in essence, Christ deceives the deceiver—and begins to heal the wounds that Adam's deception wrought in humanity. The humility of Our Lord's human condition, weakened by fasting but submissive to the will of God, is enough to overturn the pride of the serpent.

As we follow Our Lord into the desert during these forty days of Lent, our fasting and penitence is likewise a matter of identity. When we fast by lessening the quality and quantity of our meals, we prove God to be our true sustainer, subjecting the appetites of the flesh to the supernatural life of the Spirit. When we give alms, we confess God's providence, knowing that he will graciously grant our every need. When we do penance, we acknowledge the wretchedness of our condition, and profess God to be the healer of our souls.

Lent is not a trial of self-discipline. We are not saved by our good works, but our faith is proven genuine by them. Lent is a testing of our identity as children of God, reborn in Baptism, and divinized by Christ's precious Body and Blood. Our Lenten exercises, which should challenge us to a greater conformity with Christ, are a means whereby we learn to "fight manfully .. against sin, the world, and the devil." Let us therefore prove ourselves—in much patience, in many fastings, by the armour of righteousness—to be sons and daughters of God, confident in the identity he has given us, wholly trusting in Christ, allowing his Spirit to work the victory in our lives. Amen.