

First Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2020
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Reflection

During Lent, we voluntarily choose forms of fasting according to the precepts of the Church. It begins on Ash Wednesday when we abstain from meat. We also fast, confining ourselves to one full meal, plus two small meals that don't add up to one full meal. We understand that our fasting configures us to God and his kindness. Making do with less, we learn generosity. Mostly satisfied by what we take, we feel gratitude. Not quite satisfied, we become humble. Mingled with these gains, we experience temptation. Maybe just a touch: "One more bite won't put me over the line." Maybe a lot: "It's bedtime and my feet are freezing; I could use a peanut butter sandwich." Grace sees us through, mercy makes up the difference, and Thursday morning comes soon enough.

The first reading reveals the temptation felt by our first parents. Before the Fall, walking in the Garden of Eden, Adam was in perfect communion with God. He was in a state called "original solitude": a "unique, exclusive and unrepeatable relationship." But God knew that Adam was alone, even if Adam himself didn't realize it. On his own, Adam wasn't enough, so God made woman, wonder and delight. Original solitude became original unity. Love created by God flowed freely between Adam and Eve, and through them to creation. Then it returned to the creator, flourishing fully in a dance of life and love.

Gen 2:7-9, 16-18, 25; 3:1-7
Ps 51
Rom 5:12-19
Mt 4:1-11

But it didn't last. Satan tempted and lied. He said, "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Adam made a choice to disregard God's command. He put aside trust, and preferred himself to God. He ignored his limitation as creation, and abused the freedom that allowed him to love. "Seduced by the devil, he wanted to be like God, but without God, before God, and not in accordance with God (St. Maximus the Confessor)." Temptation led to original sin. "The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked." Man separated from God thought him jealous. Man separated from woman found lust and domination. Man separated from creation became subject to suffering, corruption and death.

Jesus encountered temptation as well. True God and true man, his three temptations were real. But the Suffering Servant remained faithful and obedient, so conquered Satan with love intact.

1. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." The first temptation met his body, famished after forty days. Bread is good, it's useful, and it brings earthly life, but Jesus recalled a teaching: "Man does not live by bread alone." He overturned the gluttony, lust and greed that afflicted Israel for forty years in the wilderness.
2. "Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.'"

The second temptation met his passion, zealous against sin yet patient with sinner. Flying from the temple, borne by serenading choirs of angels, starting his ministry from the center of worship: maybe it would awe the people, while giving honour to the authorities. Fame would be useful to herald the Messiah, but Jesus cited a command: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." He overturned the sloth of the prophets who resisted their calls, and their anger when their words were ignored.

3. The devil "showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'" The third temptation met his reason, which knew how unjust structures and relationships counter God's will. Authority would be useful to restore harmony and unity. (Satan got closer to the point of the mission with each temptation. Closer but not on the mark. The point wasn't bread for the hungry, or convincing proclamation, or the realization of the kingdom. It was making children of God who would give themselves for love. Satan got closer, but Jesus grew stronger with each success.) At the end he wielded divine authority: "Away with you Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" He overturned the envy of Satan who wanted God's dominion, and the pride of Adam who wanted God's knowledge and being. And his decision paved the path towards his victory on the Cross. The old Adam had chosen sin bringing death, but the new Adam chose obedience bringing life.

"Just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all people, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all people."

Jesus opened himself to temptation as the Suffering Servant. This went against Satan's expectation for the Messiah, and against man's expectation too. Our Lenten experience unites us with Jesus in the desert. The psalm states our goal: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." It also contains a plea: "Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me." Jesus gives us words that make this plea an effective petition, charged with the power to bring sufficient grace: "Lead us not into temptation." When you are being tested, say these words as a friend of God: to persevere, to endure, and to escape...or at least to say "sorry."