

First Sunday of Lent, A – March 1, 2020 – Very Reverend Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 800 words

The opening verse or antiphon of the Liturgy of the Hours (also known as the breviary) that priests and many others pray is known as the “invitatory”. And throughout almost all of the season of Lent, that verse goes: “Come, let us worship Christ the Lord, who for our sake endured temptation and suffering”. Because we repeat it daily for so long, we run the risk forgetting or missing its profound meaning: namely, that Christ – God – was tempted also! Temptation is not something that only we mere mortals are up against. Indeed, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews: “We do not have a high priest who is unable sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are – yet without sin”.¹

The temptations of Christ recounted in the gospel today are most certainly not the only ones he experienced while on earth. Just imagine what he must have suffered while hanging on the cross, with all the forces of hell raging against him as he fought that final battle that would ring in the definitive victory; it seems impious even to name the possible temptations he might have been dealt – whatever they were, they would have been aimed at making him come down and concede defeat. But he was not tempted only on the cross. He was a man, a human being like us: at so many other points along the way, the devil and his demons were telling him lies and offering him false hopes, trying to take him away from his mission.

Unlike our first parents and every mere human since, Christ was able to resist – and he always did. This is a dogma of our faith: Jesus never even briefly entertained a temptation, much less gave in. We do worship him, who for our sake endured temptation and suffering, because we know that only in him can we have victory. He sympathizes with us; he knows what we are going through! He also offers us every help we need, if we would but trust in him rather than in ourselves. The Catechism tells us that Adam and Eve sinned because they let their trust in God die in their hearts; they abused their freedom, deciding their way was better.² But Jesus comes to us saying, “I am the way... no one comes to the Father except through me”.³

In the prayer over the people at the end of this Mass, I will ask that God may strengthen our virtue through temptation. Temptation is not merely transactional and isolated, though sometimes we might think of it that way. In other words, we may lose sight of how it really does condition us over time. When we give in, it weakens our wills further: consenting to sin inclines us more fully to sin all the more. But when we resist temptation with the help of God’s grace, it strengthens us. And over time, that strengthening becomes habitual; it becomes what we know as “virtue”, the habitual disposition to do what is right. Virtue is connected with moral freedom; it makes doing what is right not only easier, but even desirable.

Yes, we need to be thinking in terms of virtue. This, in fact, is our Catholic approach to the moral life. Temptation inclines us to vice, but every vice has an opposing virtue. If we not only resist vice, but positively pursue the opposing virtues, we make real progress. This framework can inform our approach not only to Lenten discipline but to our moral life in general – guiding us to choose those practices that will most enable growth in virtue. St. Paul sums it up best: in the face of every temptation, we can recall his teaching: “Brethren: whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise – think about these things”.⁴

¹ Hebrews 4:15.

² See Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 397.

³ John 14:16.

⁴ Philippians 4:8.

The virtue-based outlook helps us to take a positive approach overall. Temptations can be vexing – especially, once we have set our hearts on pleasing God. But we can always regard them as opportunities for grace and growth: with St. Paul, we can say that “this momentary light affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”.⁵ And we can recall that Jesus was also tempted; that not only did he resist, but he offers us the means to do so. “Come, let us worship Christ the Lord, who for our sake endured temptation and suffering”. This verse is called an “invitatory”, for it invites God into our hearts and our day. He alone can resist the power of evil: we are not alone in the fight; we find strength and pursue virtue through him.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:17.