

Lenten Pastoral Letter 2008

As I sit down to begin writing what has become my customary Lenten Pastoral Letter, I am on retreat at Mount Saviour Monastery in New York State. It is the first week of Advent. It has been snowing all week and the snow (now about 4" deep) glistens on the ground as the morning sun peaks over the mountains. The long, cold nights of Advent have since then given way to the bright joy of Christmas Day, and now – ever so soon – we enter once again into the Holy Season of Lent.

The Birth of Christ, celebrated 6 weeks ago, pointed us toward Lent, toward Jesus' temptations in the desert and His glorious death on the cross for our salvation. On the 1st Sunday of Lent each year, the Gospel relates the devil's tempting of Jesus in the desert – where the Spirit has led Him after His baptism in the Jordan River. We, too, living in the barren desert of this world, are also tempted by Satan to forget our Baptismal commitment to God (which we will renew at Mass on Easter Day). Perhaps, this Lent, using Pope Benedict XVI's book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, as a guide, we can examine the devil's temptations and how he may still be tempting us in the desert of this world.

In Mark's Gospel account of the temptations (Mk 1:13), he points out the parallels between Adam and Jesus, making special effort to show how Jesus suffers along with us. And so we read that Jesus "was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to Him" (Mk 1:13). "The desert" Pope Benedict comments, "the opposite image of the garden – becomes the place of reconciliation and healing. Wild beasts are the most concrete threat that the rebellion of creation and the power of death posed to man. But here they become man's friends, as they once were in paradise. Peace is restored, the peace that Isaiah proclaimed" (27). When Jesus overcomes our sins and our harmony with God is restored, even creation is reconciled and brought back into right relationship with God and even with all other creatures.

Matthew and Luke also tell of Jesus' three temptations in the desert; temptations that reflect the inner struggles over Jesus' mission and, at the same time, address the question that we have all asked ourselves: "What really matters in human life?" At the very heart of all the temptations is the act of pushing God aside because He is seen as secondary (if not completely superfluous and annoying) when compared to the "more urgent matters" of daily life. "Constructing a world by our own lights, without reference to God, building on our own foundation; refusing to acknowledge the reality of anything beyond the political and material, while setting God aside as an illusion – that is the temptation that threatens us in many varied forms" (Benedict 28).

What the devil's temptations teach us is that we are often tempted by him with what he makes out to be "a better way to live." The temptation, when followed, causes God to fade into unreality, into a secondary world that no one really needs. At the heart of these temptations is God: is He real or not? Is He Good, or do we have to decide for ourselves what is good? God is the fundamental question in the temptations. Let's examine of the three temptations in detail following St. Matthew's account of the incident.

Jesus "fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward He was hungry" (Mt 4:2). The number 40 is filled with religious significance. First, it immediately calls to mind Israel's 40 years of wandering in the desert on the way to the Promised Land – a time when the Jewish people were both tempted and enjoyed a special closeness to God. The number 40 also reminds us of the 40 days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai before he received the 10 Commandments (the sacred tablets of the Covenant). It also calls to mind the tradition that Abraham spent 40 days and 40 nights on his journey to Mount Horeb, where he was to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Jesus' fast of 40 days is a way in which He relives Israel's Exodus, "and then reliving the chaotic meanderings of history in general" (Benedict 30).

The first temptation: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt 4:3). But remember the words Jesus heard later as he hung on the cross: "If you are the Son of God,

come down from the cross” (Mt 27:30). Here in this temptation “Mockery and temptation blend into each other: Christ is being challenged to establish His credibility by offering evidence for His claims. This demand for proof is a constantly recurring theme in the story of Jesus’ life; again and again He is reproached for having failed to prove Himself sufficiently, for having...failed to work that great miracle that will remove all ambiguity and every contradiction, so as to make it indisputable clear for everyone who and what He is or is not” (Benedict 30).

Do we demand the same of God and of Christ and of His Church? “If you are the Son of God” we say, “Then you’ll just have to prove it and show yourself. You’ll have to make lightning strike or give me some remarkable sign or miracle.” The proof of divinity that the devil asks for is that Jesus turn the stones of the desert into bread. But God had already done this when He fed the Israelites for 40 years in the desert – giving them Manna or Bread from Heaven. There are other important connections to bread in Jesus’ life: the multiplication of the loaves for the thousands who followed Jesus into the wilderness and the Eucharist. The crowds that had followed Jesus left everything behind in order to hear Jesus’ words. They had opened their hearts to His message and to one another and so they were ready to receive the bread that Jesus gives. God supplies “daily bread,” and the readiness to share with one another is an essential element of this miracle. Jesus is not deaf to the cries of the hungry and poor each day. But He places the responsibility to care for them in our hands. Once we have heard Jesus’ voice and listened to Him, then we draw near Him to live with Him (in faith and in love), and this moves us out toward our neighbor, the other.

At the Last Supper, Jesus performs the definitive miracle of bread: he turns the bread of the Passover into His very Body, the Eucharist of the Church. Here it is Jesus Himself who has become the grain of wheat that died and brought forth much fruit (cf. Jn 12:24). “He Himself has become bread for us, and *this* multiplication of the loaves endures to the end of time, without ever being depleted” (Benedict 33). With this background, we are able to better understand Jesus’ answer where he quotes the Old Testament: “Man does not live by bread alone, but...by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3).

Jesus’ second temptation: Of the three temptations this one is perhaps the most difficult to understand in terms of the lesson it holds for us. It needs really to be interpreted in terms of a “vision” which represents something that poses a real threat to Jesus and His mission (and so also to us). The first thing to realize is that the devil cites the Holy Scriptures in order to lure Jesus into his trap. “For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up lest you dash your foot against a stone” (Ps 91). Here, the devil proves to be a “Bible expert” who can perfectly quote the Scriptures. The second temptation is framed as a dispute between two Bible scholars as to the correct interpretation of Scripture. We can connect this temptation with things going on today (Benedict 35-36).

There is a common practice today of measuring the Bible against the modern worldview and “political correctness.” Today we are told that we must believe that God cannot act in human history – that everything to do with God is up to each person’s subjective opinion. So our modern world and worldview holds that the Bible does not speak of God – rather *we* speak and decide what God can do and what we will/should do (Benedict 36). There is no longer “right” and “wrong” because it is all up to my own subjective interpretation. This is the “dictatorship of relativism” about which the then Cardinal Ratzinger spoke at the opening of the Conclave of 2005.

What is the dispute of the second temptation about? The point at issue is revealed in Jesus’ answer: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deut 6:16). The passage makes reference to the time when Israel tested and tempted God to provide them water when they were dying of thirst in the desert. Israel rebelled against Moses, and in this they also rebelled against God. God now has to *prove* to the Israelites that he IS God. So the issue in this second temptation is that we sometimes force God “to submit to

experiments.” He is to be ‘tested’ just like products are tested. If He doesn’t grant us now the protection of Psalm 91, then He simply is not God. He will have shown His own word, and Himself too, to be false (Benedict 37). Haven’t you and I done this? We say to God that He *must* protect us, or cure this illness, or keep this person alive, or make me win the lottery – and if He doesn’t, then God really doesn’t exist and I can just forget about you.

But, when placed in the context of the Cross, Jesus does not “tempt God.” Rather He entrusts Himself totally to God’s will and trusts – not knowing what lies beyond the cross. Jesus descends into the abyss of death, into the night of abandonment. He made *this* leap as an act of faith in God’s love for us – trusting completely that, when he leapt, He would fall into the arms of His loving Father. This shows us the real meaning of Psalm 91 which deals with “the ultimate and unlimited trust in God: ... If you follow the will of God, you know that in spite of all the terrible things that happen to you, you will never lose a final refuge. You know that the foundation of the world is love, so that even when no human being can or will help you, you may go on, trusting in the One who loves you” (Benedict 38) – and that One is God.

Jesus’ third temptation is truly the climax of the whole story. The devil takes the Lord to a high mountain where he shows Him all the kingdoms of the world in a single glance and offers Him kingship over the entire world. “Isn’t [Jesus] supposed to be the king of the world who unifies the whole earth in one great kingdom of peace and well being” (Benedict 38)? Just as the first temptation to turn stones into bread has two counterparts (the multiplication of the loaves and the Last Supper), the same thing is true here.

As Jesus prepares to ascend to the Father, the risen Lord gathers His followers “on the mountain,” and here he says that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18). Here there are two details which are new and different. “The Lord has power *in heaven* and on earth. And only someone who has this fullness of authority has the real, saving power. Without heaven, earthly power is always ambiguous and fragile. Only when power submits to the measure of the judgment of heaven – of God, in other words – can it become power for good. And only when power stands under God’s blessing can it be trusted” (Benedict 39). This is, I believe, where Church and State actually do intersect – and why, for 100’s of years, the Church was both a religious and political institution – although even the men of the Church were unable to resist the temptation to corruption.

This points to the second element which is new: Jesus has this power in virtue of His resurrection from the dead. It presupposes the cross, His death. It presupposes that other mountain – Golgotha, where He hangs on the Cross and dies, mocked and forsaken by all. The Kingdom of Christ is entirely different from every earthly kingdom. Earthly kingdoms have the *illusion* of grandeur and splendor (Benedict 39), but unless they submit themselves to God, it is all purely illusion. But God’s kingdom, which has the *illusion* of defeat and despair, is the only truly splendid Kingdom. Jesus Kingdom “grows through the humility of the proclamation in those who agree to become His disciples, who are baptized in the name of the Triune God, and who keep his commandments (cf. Mt 28:19f)” (39).

This third temptation of Christ is constantly taking on new forms. “The Christian empire attempted at an early stage to use the faith in order to cement political unity. The Kingdom of Christ was now expected to take the form of a political kingdom and its splendor. The powerlessness of faith, the earthly powerlessness of Jesus Christ, was to be given the helping hand of political and military might. This temptation to use power to secure the faith has arisen again and again in varied forms throughout the centuries, and again and again faith has been risked being suffocated in the embrace of power” (39-40). Is this not what is happening in our current struggles with Islam and terrorism? Have not faith and politics become so intertwined that true faith is being suffocated by power and domination?

While faith and the Church must have an influence on society, our founding Fathers were wise in decreeing that there be no State religion. “The struggle for the freedom of the Church, the struggle to avoid identifying Jesus’ Kingdom with any political structure, is one that has to be fought century after century. For the fusion of faith and political power always comes at a price: faith becomes the servant of power” (40).

Ultimately, the third temptation is a choice between Jesus and His Kingdom (which entails a looming threat of failure, suffering and persecution) **or** a politically planned and thoroughly organized world where God may have His place as a private concern, but must not interfere in our worldly concerns and affairs. The devil is not so bold as to ask us to choose between worshiping him or God. Rather, his temptation is much more subtle: don’t choose Christ, but choose instead political “saviors” and leave God in your churches and out of world affairs. Again, isn’t this where we find ourselves today? Haven’t we placed our confidence and trust in the next President of the United States to overcome the housing crisis and resolve the situation in the Middle East? Would we do better to place our trust not in Mr. (or Mrs.) president to save us, but in God, the true King?

In the Old Testament there are two strands of hope: one which expects a worldly paradise in which the wolf lies down with the lamb (cf. Is 11:6) (where the people of the world create their own “paradise,” and another where the suffering servant of God brings salvation through contempt and suffering (43). So many think that in order to make good on His claim of being the Messiah, Jesus should have ushered in the “golden age.” However, Jesus replies to Satan that no kingdom of this world is the Kingdom of God. “Earthly kingdoms remain earthly kingdoms, and anyone who claims to be able to establish the perfect world is the willing dupe of Satan and plays the world right into his hands. (44).

What, really, through His Incarnation, death and resurrection, has Jesus brought to the world? Peace? A political kingdom? Universal prosperity? A better world? No. What Jesus has brought to the world is: GOD. He has brought God. He has revealed to us, as He did to Abraham and Moses and the prophets, the true God. Now, we know God’s face, now we can call upon Him. Now we know the path that we human beings have to take in this world. Jesus has brought God and with God the truth about our origin and destiny: faith, hope and love. This is why Christ was born in the manger and suffered on the cross, to show us God’s face – to show us Love (44).

God’s power works quietly in this world, but it is the true and lasting power. Again and again God’s cause appears to be dead or dying, “but over and over it proves to be the only thing that truly endures and saves. The earthly kingdoms Satan was able to put before Jesus have all passed away. But the glory of Christ, the humble, self-sacrificing glory of His love, has not passed away, nor will it ever do so” (44). “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Mt 4:10) Jesus replies to Satan. God alone is to be worshiped.

This is our task for Lent this year, to “worship the Lord” alone. All other temptations to trust worldly power, to tempt and test God, to place our priorities somewhere other than God, will lead us to despair and destruction. Only in God is our soul at rest. Only by returning to Him this Lent, will we be able to discover His love – His Kingdom which endures forever.

May this Lenten season draw you close to our Lord and help you to experience His Love and the fullness of His Kingdom.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

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Pastor