

The Christian combat

Theme: Temptations (Lent)

These readings convey the sense of new beginnings for mankind. After the flood, God establishes a covenant with Noah. Jesus is also proclaiming the arrival of God's Kingdom, the Kingdom of grace. But in both cases, a purification and a battle against evil has preceded hope. The flood. The temptations in the desert. Why? Because in order to follow the good path, one must be determined to fight against evil, even that evil that is within oneself. That's why Jesus goes to the desert: to prepare Himself and to defeat temptations. These temptations were present during all His ministry, and they appear from the beginning, during this time of silent preparation.

It is important to notice that temptation is not sin, but an invitation to sin. Many people, when tempted, feel: 'I am full of sin, I feel bad because of these thoughts or desires...' Those things that come to your mind, those desires are not a sin until the moment you consent. You consent them when you say: 'I'll continue thinking about them, I won't fight them', or even 'I will act on them'.

It is also important to know that not all about temptations is negative. Soldiers need battle, or at least drills, if they are not to become rusty and chubby. The same thing happens here. Each temptation we overcome is an act of love. Through defeating temptations we acquire solid virtue. Through experiencing temptation we get to know our frailty and how much we need of God's grace. Great part of Christian life consists in unmasking temptations and learning how to fight against them. So let's try to know a bit more about them.

There are three sources of temptations:

1. The flesh: this means our own passions, will and intelligence, that to some extent are in disarray. They have been damaged by original sin and by our own sins. Ideally, our mind should lead our will, our mind and will should lead our passions, but that's not always the case. Many times we are the prey of passions that are tortuous, overbearing, aggressive and totally irrational. How many times we react with anger, defensiveness, distrust, against our immediate family and closest friends, over the smallest things.

I've heard many times things like, 'I think I have a devil in me'. Perhaps it's just that thorn in the flesh that makes us so rebellious or angry. The devil sometimes doesn't worry to tempt us. We do such a good job on our own!

a. The strategy to fight some temptations like pride, anger, laziness and others is 'agere contra'. Do the opposite. Your pride tells you: 'Vent your anger now... let him come and talk to you if he wants to fix things'. Do the opposite of what your pride tells you: be humble, go and ask for forgiveness.

b. To fight other temptations like lust and doubts against the faith, the best thing is to run away. Flee. Those temptations are like a dummy made of tar. You want to punch it, and it just sticks to you, and after a while you are all messed up with this sticky black thing. It's better to go out, think of something different, go visit a friend...

2. The world – this means the influence of others who set a bad example. Friends, co-workers, relatives who lead you to adopt a secular mentality, to think without faith, as if enjoyment of this life is all there is. C. S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, wrote this amazing

book, the Screwtape Letters, in which an experienced demon explains his nephew how to tempt a Christian. Lewis writes:

“My dear Wormwood, I was delighted to hear from Triptweeze that your patient has made some very desirable new acquaintances... I gather that the middle-aged married couple who called at his office are just the sort of people we want him to know—rich, smart, superficially intellectual, and brightly sceptical about everything in the world. And you seem to have made good use of all his social, sexual, and intellectual vanity. Tell me more. Did he commit himself deeply? I don't mean in words. There is a subtle play of looks and tones and laughs by which a Mortal can imply that he is of the same party as those to whom he is speaking. That is the kind of betrayal you should specially encourage, because the man does not fully realise it himself; and by the time he does you will have made withdrawal difficult” (C. S. Lewis, Screwtape Letters, c.10).

How do we fight against the world? Avoid situations that you sense are undermining your faith. Learn about your faith, see its splendor and beauty: the more you discover the amazing world that is therein, the less you'll be tempted by the splendor of this world.

When Chesterton was about to become Catholic, his friends said to him: ‘So you are going to be kneeling all day, cloistered in an old stuffy building, with candles and weird images?’ - ‘It's exactly the opposite, he replied, it seems that I have been living in an old stuffy building all my life, and now that I become Catholic I can finally come out, out from a little cellar into a shatteringly enormous world, with all the winds of heaven whistling through my hair’.

3. The devil – He mainly utilizes the other two sources of temptation: the flesh and the world. Diabolic temptations are unusual and sudden. The devil's favorite temptations are to sow division, discouragement and delusion. We fight these through prayer and the Sacraments.

What are the most obvious temptations in our lives? Are we able to unmask them (some times they are undercover)? What should our strategy be to fight them? Do we know where the attack is coming from? If we don't, it is very difficult that we can defend ourselves. That's dangerous: to be under attack and not to know it.

As we begin this Lent, Jesus is proclaiming to each one of us: ‘The Kingdom of God is at hand: I have great plans for you, a new and better life awaits you, so good as you can't even imagine. If you want it, come with me to the desert, join me in the battle, and I will lead you to victory!’