

## The Evil Spirit in Conflict with Christ and His Followers

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A balanced understanding of Christ and His Church includes the realization of the conflict with the evil spirit or, as Saint John calls him, the *spirit of darkness*. Until not so long ago, it was not acceptable to even talk about the devil; but all of a sudden it became quite popular. Though much of the popularity is not very deep, it does indicate an instinctive realization in man's heart that there is a world of spirits besides the world of sense, space and time; and not only is there a spirit world which is good, but given the sheer magnitude of evil in the world, there must be in addition to human malice, invisible malice that is at work in the human race today.

We who believe in the Holy Spirit also might (though we do not) include in our recitation of the *Creed*, "And I believe in the *evil spirit*." We believe in both. We believe that he is not only the instinctive or even logical conclusion to some explanation of the evil in the world; we believe that the evil spirit is not only real, but that his name is Legion, and that he is to be taken seriously in any attentive approach to the spiritual life.

### Jesus' temptation

As the context for our reflections, we take from the beginning of Christ's public life the narrative about the temptation in the wilderness. The three synoptic Evangelists (*Matthew, Mark, and Luke*) all give the account. Saint Matthew's description, however, is the most detailed and it is the one that we shall use. He tells us that Christ was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the evil spirit. Saint Matthew further says that Christ fasted for forty days and forty nights and that after that long period of time He was hungry. Then he describes the three sets of temptations:

The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves." But he replied, "Scripture says: Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The devil then took him to the holy city and made Him stand on the parapet of the Temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down; for Scripture says: He will put you in His angels' charge, and they will support you on their hands in case you hurt your foot against a stone."

Jesus said to him, "Scripture also says: You must not put the Lord your God to the test."

Next, taking Him to a very high mountain, the devil showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "I will give you all these," he said, "if you fall at my feet and worship me." Then Jesus replied, "Be off, Satan! For Scripture says: You must worship the Lord your God, and serve Him alone." Then the devil left Him, and angels appeared and looked after Him.

### Three great concupiscences

I will briefly recapitulate each of the three temptations, with just a word about each one, and then draw some very salutary implications. Saint John tells us there are three great sources of temptation which we call the three great concupiscences. These three kinds of desires, because we have a fallen nature, tend to betray us.

1. First there is *concupiscence of the flesh*, illustrated by the fact that the devil began by asking Christ, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves." The Fathers of the Church agree that the devil did not know whether Christ was the Son of God. Concupiscence of the flesh is symbolized by the temptation to gluttony.
2. Then, *concupiscence of the eyes*. Christ was tempted in such a way as to want to

display Himself or, in effect, to tempt God's Providence, to sin by presumption.

3. Finally, everything was promised to Christ, so the devil told Him, if only Christ would kneel down to worship him. This is the concupiscence which Saint John calls *the pride of life*.

### **Three sources of temptation: world, flesh and the devil**

In order to look at these three sources of temptation we have to remind ourselves that there are three ways we can be tempted. I am now distinguishing temptation from the *concupiscence of the flesh, of the eyes, and the pride of life*. Speaking in general, we can be tempted by people outside of us, which is typified by *the world*; we can be tempted from within ourselves, which is typified by *the flesh*; and we can be tempted by *the evil spirit*.

**First, temptations from the world** may be summarily described as all the temptations to which we are subject through bad example. Indeed this is one of the graces of religious life, that we may deliver ourselves so far as it is possible from what is symbolized by the world. One of the rights that religious have when they enter a community is to be given good example. Why are we tempted by people's bad example? This temptation is based on the urge that we all have to conformity. We want to be like other people; we want others to accept us. And the one thing that we most dread is to be rejected. We don't want to be different. We fear being ostracized.

**Second, the flesh.** We commonly attribute this to temptations of the body, of the sensual or sexual passions which we all have with our fallen natures. But this "flesh" is not only passions of the flesh! This irrationality is the mad drive within us that is both in the body and in the soul. The Church never teaches us that it is only our flesh which is fallen. It is our *nature* which is fallen. These maddening desires of ours are, except for God's grace, out of control not only in our bodily urges but in the urges of our spirit, of our minds and of our wills.

Over the years, the Church has found a convenient synthesis in what we call the Seven Capital Sins. So they are sins, when we give in to them. But more accurately, they are the seven major drives or tendencies that all of us have. They are not, of themselves, sins. No matter how strong or demanding they may be, no matter how urgent, they become sins only if, when, and insofar as we give in to them. The only two people we are absolutely sure did not have these drives are the Son of God in human form and the Immaculate Mother. But all of us have these urges and desires. They are the result of Original Sin. And for reasons best known to Divine Providence, though we are justified and in God's grace, nevertheless the drives still remain as long as we are in this valley of tears.

I want to bring out a very important principle of the spiritual life and something that we should take stock of seriously. We should ask ourselves before God daily:

- "Which among these tendencies has been dominant today?"
- To which of these tendencies of my fallen nature have I succumbed often and perhaps quite unobtrusively, so no one else knows except God and I?"
- Which of these temptations are not only in the body but, far more subtly, are in the spirit?"

When sins of the flesh are involved—not necessarily crude sins of the flesh, but just weaknesses of the flesh—they are usually obvious. The flesh being visible, we see it and others do too, either doing something or not doing something it should. But when it is the spirit that is not perfectly responsive to the will of God, it takes extraordinary clarity of mind and ruthlessness with one's self and honesty with God to admit we have sinned in having given in, in greater or lesser measure, to such temptations. These are not even fully conscious deliberate sins, but the sins to which we are all naturally prone.

**Third, temptation by the devil.** Finally, *the devil*. Regarding temptations of the evil spirit, we should keep certain truths of our faith in mind, particularly as seen in the light of Christ's own temptation by the evil spirit. [Matthew 4:1-11]

**Truth #1. No one is spared temptations by the devil**

No one is spared temptations by the devil. This is a universal principle of Christianity, because if Christ was tempted by the evil spirit, we may be sure that every other human being will undergo the same trial. Therefore, we may have no complacency. And no matter how preserved one may think he or she is from the world, we are never totally free. But let us suppose we think that somehow we have mastered the temptations which arise from our own passions of body or spirit. The one thing that we can never think we have finished is the contest against the devil. This is one of the main reasons why the Church is so concerned until the dying person has gasped his last breath, praying that the person might be delivered from the evil spirit. No one is spared.

**Truth #2. The devil tempts us on three levels of body and soul**

The devil tempts us on three levels of our being. We can now reflect on Christ's own triad of temptations.

1. He tempts us first of all on the level of our *weaknesses of the flesh*. "Tempt" here has the connotation of trying something out, like pulling and tugging to see if it gives. The devil knows that we have weaknesses of the flesh, so he is testing, testing, to find out what is our particular weakness. Notice that it is not just weaknesses in general or in the abstract. Our moods change, so we may be tempted to certain things in the morning that we would never give in to at night. He tempts our weaknesses in our appetites for food, drink, sex, sloth and possessions which cater to the body. That is quite an extent—no wonder there are so many devils!
2. The devil also tempts us on the level of our *selfishness of spirit*. The horror of

crimes of the spirit is that they are not crimes of weakness; they are crimes of strength. These are notably our tendency to anger, envy and avarice.

3. He tempts us on the level of our *desire for power*. We need not have read a lot of Nietzsche or have studied much philosophy to recognize this drive. All we have to do is deal with human beings. We should not think of this desire for power as a masculine temptation. Among the persons who, given the chance and having lost their self-control, can be positively luciferian in their desire for power are some women. Here, the evil spirit tempts our pride and unwillingness to be subject to others or to be considered less than someone else.

**Truth #3. To cope with the evil spirits, resist immediately**

In order to cope with the evil spirits, we have to follow Christ's example. He resisted immediately. Christ did not have to pray. Being all-holy, He did not have to pray and ask God for aid to overcome His fallen nature. [For, of course, He did not have a fallen nature.] He didn't have to allow Himself to be tempted by the devil, but He did to teach us that we should expect the same. This presumes that we can recognize the evil spirit and his temptations so as not to dally with them, because if we do, the likelihood is that he will outwit us. Christ has taught us that we must resist promptly.

**Truth #4. Resist the devil with prayer and trust in God**

Finally, the Apostle Matthew tells us we must resist the devil "strong in faith," using those powers at our disposal, *especially prayer and trust in God*. No matter how much we may be beset by the temptations of the evil spirit, we must not lose confidence. We must also call upon the resources of faith on the first two levels of temptation — those *from the world* (or the temptation from outside of us, from human agencies); and those *from the flesh* (which covers

temptation in both the body and in the soul from our fallen human nature).

Nevertheless, somehow we may feel that we are a match for these temptations. But with the devil we know we are no match, and consequently, it is not a question of just outwitting the devil or outsmarting him or foolishly allowing ourselves to tangle with him and then wrestle with him. He is too strong; he is too shrewd. We must, therefore, call upon divine assistance, *first for light* so that we might recognize when we are being deceived by the evil one; and then, if the temptation is upon us and we recognize it is the devil, we must not panic or be frightened, but admit, "I cannot overcome him by myself, but I trust in the grace that God will give me, provided I ask Him."

The devil is strong, but the most important thing to remember is that the devil is deceptive. Consequently, when we pray in the closing of *The Lord's Prayer*, "deliver us from evil," we should understand this to include especially "deliver us from the evil one's deceits," meaning that we are asking for the grace to see. If there is anywhere that the Gospel invocation "O Lord, that I may see" applies, it is here.

*O Lord, that I may see* that it is not the grace of God, but the enemy of God, who may hide as an angel of light and who is trying to beguile me; that I may see this enemy and then, like Christ and with Christ, be confident that, because Christ has called me to follow Him, He will give me the grace to resist even as He did, having recognized the devil for what he is.

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