

The Third Temptation: Hollywood or Bust

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Thoughts shared with young adults from Saint Louis parish

The temptations of Christ occur in the desert.

The desert is a metaphor for solitude, although not in the sense of loneliness,

The desert is a metaphor for aloneness, aloneness *with*,

intimacy with the One Whom we do not see yet desire.

Saint John Chrysostom says,

"Not only Christ was led into the desert by the Spirit,

but all God's children who have the Holy Spirit."

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which transmit the temptations of Christ, suggest that when

- we respond to the invitation to intimacy with God
- we follow Jesus into the desert
there will be temptation,
temptation awaits us.

Why? Because Satan, the ultimate source of temptation, actively refuses Jesus,
and actively refuses what Jesus comes to do.

Satan, therefore, actively refuses those associated to Jesus.

Satan's preoccupation is that of turning *away* those who are turned *towards* Jesus.

This is important to realize.

During Lent there is assuredly a grace for awareness of this, a grace to deal with this.

What *are* temptations?

Temptations are *un*-loving possibilities that present themselves, and, if pursued, can, because they are unloving, lead us astray from

- our intimacy with God *and thus*
- our true selves

We are tempted to turn away in three primary ways,
which we observe in the temptations of Christ.

We too experience the very temptations of Christ.

There is an interesting parallel between

- the three temptations of Christ (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)
- how the woman is tempted to see the fruit in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3)
- the three struggles mentioned by John in his first epistle (I John 2:15-17),
traditionally called *concupiscences*.

These are our three weak spots, our three "vulnerabilities", which make it hard for us to love,
upon which anyone who does not want us to love can play.

In the end, the Devil does not want us to love.

He thus seeks to entangle us.

Saint Ambrose says, in going into the Desert to be tempted,

Jesus "set an example to us, showing that the devil envies those who strive for better things."

Jesus deliberately goes into the Desert to be tempted so that nothing keep us from loving.

[The Devil, by the way, tempts, i.e. seeks to make falter Jesus,
by appealing to those weaknesses he has observed in humans.]

By the way:

Why does God let us be tempted?

It seems almost to be a pastime of His!

So much so, that we pray regularly, "Lead us not into temptation".

Saint Thomas says,

"There is no danger in giving the devil such an occasion of temptation;
since the help of the Holy Spirit, who is the Author of the perfect deed,
is more powerful than the assault of the envious Devil."

God does not *lead* into temptation, but certainly *allows* temptation.

Why?

It can only be for a greater good.

The allowance of temptation shows that

intimacy with God is more precious to God than our moral perfection,
which is often what we are seeking when we asked to be spared temptation:
"Lord, do not let me do anything bad!"

The primacy of divine intimacy over moral perfection, however, does not mean, of course,
that we just let ourselves unravel morally!

But our eyes ought to be fixed on the Lord present
more than any image of our morally perfect selves.

Let us indeed now place in parallel the third temptation in these three passages:

1. Matthew 4: 8-9
2. Genesis 3:5
3. I John 2:16

1. Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him,
"All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me."
2. "God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods."
3. "All that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world."

We are vulnerable to what we call *vainglory*, to being the center of attention.

All three temptations are forms of selfishness,

even though they are things which are fundamentally good in due proportion.

Healthy self-love, healthy acknowledgment of my goodness gone wild,

i.e. become *dis*-proportionate, is vainglory.

(The second and third temptations could each arguably be vainglory/vanity or power.)

The psalmist rightly asks, with the hope of shedding light,

"Why do you love vanity?" (Psalm 4:3)

What is vainglory?

I think it is broader than vanity—as we currently think of vanity.

Vanity most often has to do with looks.

Vainglory has to do with public acknowledgment of anything, looks included.

As stated, there is healthy acknowledgement of one's goodness

and one's good acts and accomplishments, and even one's good looks.

Vainglory is the opposite of magnanimity, which Thomas Aquinas says,

“implies a stretching forth of the mind and heart to great things”.

One can be acknowledged for such stretching forth, and the acknowledgement is a good thing.

Things go awry in at least a couple of ways:

1. when we seek the acknowledgement for stupid things: Hollywood here I come!
2. when we seek the acknowledgement for itself: Hollywood here I come!

Hollywood gives us tremendous food for thought.

I do not want to dismiss the creativity that there may be in the Hollywood scene.

I am thinking specifically about the adulation of “stars”.

“I want to be famous.” American *idol*.

We have even reached the point where people are famous for being famous!

How far removed can we get from true reasons for admiration?

A *good* actor or actress can become famous.

But fame, strictly speaking, has nothing to do with the art of acting.

On the side of the actor or actress, the fame is not necessarily vainglory, just glory

– if they take it with a grain of salt, and stay focused on their craft.

In our society, unfortunately, for lack of depth, and lack of connection with God (which satisfies spiritual hunger),

we disproportionately admire people whom we do not know, based on images, not reality.

We have “stars”, pseudo-spiritual entities.

Vainglory has become largely acceptable and commonplace.

We admire those who seek passing things, such as wealth and power.

We are easily swayed by political candidates who look good or sound good, without really looking at character and perspective.

Vainglory is opposed to greatness, “bigness” of mind and heart.

When we seek to be admired for stupid, irrelevant things, our minds and hearts shrink.

When we seek to be admired for the sake of being admired (“I want to be famous.”), our minds and hearts shrink.

As the temptations of Christ, and Genesis and Saint John suggest, we are vulnerable to this.

Why? Because we are made to be loved, and being loved implies a certain admiration by the person who loves us.

The right context for acknowledgement and admiration is love.

If we take it out of context, i.e. extract it, things go awry.

Our purpose is to love and be loved.

In human relationships, the order is:

1. love
2. be loved

In our relationship with God, the order is:

1. be loved
2. love

Thus, to deal with the struggle with vainglory *humanly speaking*, we are to

- love
- enter into relationships with persons who reciprocate, i.e. love us.
- seek that which is honorable, that which respects who I am, and enables me to love.
- along the way, we welcome praise for that which is honorable (St Paul says, somewhere (!), “Seek that which is lovely and honorable and true.”)

To deal with the struggle with vainglory *divinely speaking*, as children of God, we are to *adore* God.

If we direct our admiration towards God, the One most worthy of it, then we fine-tune our perspective, and elevate our hearts.

Notice the response of Jesus to Satan in the third temptation, and notice what John says.

The two echo one another

“The world and its enticement are passing away.

But whoever does the will of God remains forever.

“The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.”

The will of God is that we adore Him, and thereby enter into intimacy with Him.

In our intimacy with God, we can rise above temptation,

and our minds and hearts are stretched forth in truly luminous and loving ways.

Saint Paul also speaks to this question, very specifically

Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power.

Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens.

Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground.

So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace.

In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all (the) flaming arrows of the evil one.

And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit.

(Ephesians 6:10-18)