

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The First Sunday of Lent
March 1, 2020

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Holy Mother Church knows of what we are made. After encouraging the faithful to take on Lenten discipline, she immediately warns us about *temptation*. On the very First Sunday in Lent she remembers the greatest temptation incident ever! We have just heard about the Lord Jesus being confronted by all that Satan has to offer.

Temptation often comes dressed up in respectable clothes! The devil offers to “*help*” Jesus with what He wants to do. You and I get the same treatment. We are never snared by a temptation we find repugnant. Temptations have their force when they appeal to things we desire. And it gets complicated! Often the temptation is to do good things in bad ways, or in good ways which will lead to a bad end.

The Temptation of Christ is a familiar incident. We hear it every year on the First Sunday in Lent. But we often misunderstand the Lord’s answer to the devil. The Lord says, “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” We suppose Jesus is telling Satan not to tempt Me, your God. But both the Lord and the devil himself know that interpretation is ridiculous. The devil is evil but he is no fool. He’s not going to tempt Almighty God! Rather, Jesus is *reminding Himself* of the Ten Commandments. The Lord is thinking out loud, in the presence of the devil. Jesus of Nazareth is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. *But He is also Mary’s Son*. Blessed Mary and Saint Joseph taught Jesus His religion. It is Mary’s Son Who remembers He must not tempt the Lord God. Like every one of us, Jesus must not tempt His Father by making a trial of God’s love. We too must not put Divine power to the test by deliberately exposing ourselves to danger and daring God to neglect us.

Our Blessed Lord suffered all the temptations of fallen human nature. This is a sign of Christ’s humility in becoming man. He allowed Himself to be tempted by the devil. And it is not role play! At Christmas we heard something about the humility of God being born as a baby. At His Baptism something is made of the fact Almighty God stood in line with all sorts of people, waiting for a baptism of repentance only He did not need. In Lent we remember our Lord’s Passion and Death as a common criminal. But perhaps the greatest show of God’s solidarity with you and me is Jesus permitting Himself to be tempted by that old deceiver and

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first-rate sleaze-ball who is the enemy of souls. Just think of it! If we can call the devil such names, how repugnant he must appear to the One Who is Perfect Holiness! In a marvelous way, the temptation of Christ reveals Jesus as the God-Man. The devil may or may not know Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. But Satan certainly can and does approach the Lord Jesus *as man*, with temptations.

In those temptations Jesus shows us His way is our way. It is right to trust God to rescue us, in His Own time and in the ways He sees best for us, to save us from all the dangers and tribulations which can befall us in this life. But it is a much different thing to go after danger willfully and expect Almighty God to save us from our own recklessness. We are never in a position to force God's hand, or presume His goodness will act when we expect or demand it.

Never in Christian history has the Church told the faithful to go out and find trouble! Our Lord Himself gave the direction. "When they persecute you in one city, flee to another." (*Matthew 10:23*) The right of avoiding persecution is always recognized. Christians pray as Jesus taught us. "*Lead us not into temptation.*" We are never to surrender the faith. But we are not to go looking for trouble.

Sadly *we do the opposite*. We tempt God when we go out of our way to place ourselves in situations dangerous to faith and morals. We are wrong in lightheartedly courting occasions to sin and telling ourselves it is harmless. We are wrong to say something is all right for us when our conduct may cause offense or stumbling to someone else. Jesus shows us the way. His temptation is an example for every one of His followers.

"*Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*" is no mere negative precept! We are to cultivate the opposite. Make up your mind, not only for Lent but for all life, to walk safely in a world of temptations, by fortifying yourself against the allurements of a selfish, self-centered, and hedonistic world. You do this by prayer and sacraments, by study of God's Word to know His will for you, and giving yourself to it, by abandoning self-assertion and placing yourself in the Lord's Hands. That is what Saint Paul called putting on "*the whole armor of God.*" That is what Jesus did. He remembered His religion. In a moment of temptation He

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remembered the Ten Commandments. In the hearing of the devil himself Jesus reminded Himself: “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” And then being true to His faith, we are told the angels came and ministered unto Him.