

Temptation & Deception

Setting Things Right with the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Dear Friends of the Heart of Christ,

Years ago when I was considering a religious vocation because I felt that God might be calling me in that direction, I made a vocation retreat at the Visitation Monastery in Wilmington, Delaware. It was my first experience of being inside a cloistered contemplative monastery, and I was extremely nervous about it. I remember my knees knocking as I stood before the austere looking façade and rang the doorbell. It was just a short week-end encounter, but before I left to return to graduate school, the Directress of Novices gave me a book to read to help with my spiritual discernment. She was a great admirer of C.S. Lewis and handed me a copy of his book entitled *The Screwtape Letters*. This Christian apologetic novel, composed as a satire in fictional form, was used by Lewis to address Christian theological issues, especially those dealing with temptation and our resistance to it. Written in 1942, the story takes the form of a series of letters from a senior demon named Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood, a junior tempter. Reading these accounts in the 31 letters which constitute the book, I became acutely aware of how vulnerable our human nature is to the subtle machinations of the devil. It certainly made me uneasy, but was a good lesson on how our faith and principles can be undermined by what the world considers valuable and what we as humans gravitate toward for our own pleasure and fulfillment. As Screwtape writes to his inexperienced nephew, "...the softest road to hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turning, without milestones, without signposts." The devil's favorite ploy is to compromise a person's faith and morals gradually and imperceptibly.

It is no surprise that many people today consider the existence of the devil as an old-fashioned fairy tale or fantasy. According to Father Gabriele Amorth, an expert in the rite of exorcism, "We have a clergy and an episcopate who no longer believe in the devil." And according to a recent research study, an incredible 50% of those who profess to be "born again" actually deny Satan's existence. How convenient this all is for the "father of lies." The greatest temptation of the devil is to lead us either to think that he does not exist or to forget he exists. Then, like a crafty spy he can do his work without even being detected. Just recently, there appeared an article about an Australian priest psychologist who is being investigated for comments he made about an exorcism on ABC radio. Complaining about him because he referred two patients for exorcism, a health care commission questioned if this were legal. The priest explained that the patients he referred were showing many qualities about their personalities that were just not right even though psychological assessments said there was nothing wrong at all. However, the Catholic Bishop of the diocese said he had never approved the undertaking of the rite of exorcism and to his knowledge it had never been performed in his diocese. This is just one example of many that reveals the problematic nature of trying to help people who may be influenced by or infiltrated with evil spirits.

As Catholics and Christians we cannot accept the notion that evil is an abstraction and that it does not exist. The *Catechism* refers to Satan, the evil one who opposes God, as a creature. He is the one who obstructs God's will and wants to destroy his work of salvation in Christ. And he uses human instruments who fall prey to his temptations to promote his destructive designs. We may have had experiences in our past where people whom we liked or had trusted led us along the wrong paths. They may have done this in such a way that seemed very logical and natural to our senses and so we fell for their convincing words or ways. Sometimes these very persons that are agents of evil do not even recognize that they are part of satan's system to thwart God's plans and laws. It takes much prayer and fasting to rid ourselves of our natural propensity to sin. But our efforts in this regard can make us more sensitive in discerning the devil's temptations and in knowing what God wants in our lives.

That is why the Church, as we began the penitential season of Lent which calls all of us to repentance and conversion, places before our consciousness on the First Sunday of Lent the scene of the temptation of Christ in the desert (see Lk 4:1-13). Jesus has been fasting for forty days and nights and humanly he is vulnerable. The devil takes this opportunity to do his dirty work. Three times

he presents the Lord with attractive options. If Jesus is hungry, the devil reasons, let him use his power to provide food. Isn't this a crafty way to divert Jesus from his real mission and to dampen his trust in the Father? In the second temptation, Jesus is invited to fall down and worship the devil. If he does, then he will have the kingdoms of the world at his feet. Isn't this an easy way to attain power, privilege or prestige? How many times have we compromised the truth or the right way to get what we wanted or to get ahead? Finally, in the third temptation, Jesus is invited to throw himself from a dizzying pinnacle, for then the devil declares, God will surely show his power to save him. How many times have we tested the Lord and demanded he do things our way, on our terms, not his? Then when God fails to respond to our petitions or situation the way we want, we fall into thinking that God really doesn't care about us after all. By examining more closely Jesus' responses to these temptations, we can determine how to react to the various temptations in our own lives.

Now, what does all this have to do with Sacred Heart spirituality? Everything, I answer. Anyone who seeks to love and adore the Sacred Heart of Jesus is in for abundant blessings from God but also abundant blasts from the devil. These dark forces are ever on the watch to trip us up, especially if we are striving for a closer relationship with the Lord. As Bishop Fulton Sheen so keenly observed in one of his retreat lectures, "Whenever you have a great manifestation of the Spirit, you always get the devil working." With profound insightfulness Sheen cautions us: "Do not mock the Gospels and say there is no Satan. Evil is too real in the world to say that. Do not say the idea of Satan is dead and gone. Satan never gains so many cohorts as when, in his shrewdness, he spreads the rumor that he is long since dead. Do not reject the Gospel because it says the Savior was tempted. Satan always tempts the pure—the others are already his. Satan stations more devils on monastery walls than in dens of iniquity, for the latter offer no resistance. Do not say it is absurd that Satan should appear to our Lord, for Satan must always come close to the godly and the strong—the others succumb from a distance."

If we take a look at the life of St. Margaret Mary, we'll find a good illustration of what Sheen is talking about. Margaret Mary writes in her *Autobiography*, "My diabolical persecution never slackened. Satan tempted me to everything except impurity—my divine Master had forbidden him that entry." "I had to put up with violent assaults from the devil," she writes in another entry, "and despair was the spearhead of his attack. A creature as wicked as myself, he pointed out, shouldn't aspire to a place in heaven; even now I had no place in God's heart, and I'd be completely cut off from him for all eternity! This made me shed floods of tears. Another time, his attack centered on vainglory. Next, he tried the loathsome temptation to gluttony..."

Several parts of St. Margaret Mary's *Autobiography* inform us of her various temptations by the devil. Pride, despair and gluttony, she tells us, were the temptations she had to watch out for the most. She confides, "I was more frightened of all this than I was of death, but the Lord assured me that there was really nothing to fear. He'd be fighting for me and I'd find in Him the reward of my victories; he'd enfold me with his power." What can we learn from these experiences of our saint? Well, even those who are practicing their faith ardently are going to be tempted. The devil will always be on the lookout for our weak spots. He never tires of putting doubts in our mind, of muddling our thinking, of suggesting to us that God is not interested in showing us miserable sinners his love and mercy, and that there is nothing for us after we die but an eternal oblivion that will finally give us peace and eradicate all our problems.

Why is the Sacred Heart so threatening to the devil? Because the Sacred Heart of Jesus really is *all love and mercy*. All we have to do is turn to him with sincerity in our hearts and he will respond with graces to help us in our struggles. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is the antithesis of the hatred and depravity of the demons, the absolute exact opposite of everything the devil stands for. I thought it was interesting as I reviewed an article about Fr. Gabriele Amorth whom I mentioned earlier, that in the photo of him at the top of the article, there was hanging behind his shoulder a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This is a good example to us all that when we surround ourselves with reminders of the presence of the Sacred Heart, we call down his powerful protection around us.

Recently, I finished reading a book entitled *Race with the Devil*. It is the conversion story of Joseph Pearce, a former member of various hard-core hate groups in England. The subtitle of the book is: "My Journey from Racial Hatred to Radical Love." From an early age, Pearce was drawn into major white-supremacist groups and used his considerable talents to promote extremist hate and violence. With utmost dedication to the cause, he became a top member of the National Front and was a living, breathing model of a full-time revolutionary and virulent anti-Catholic demonstrator. Thrown into prison on two occasions, his solitary confinement made him think over his life. Being an avid reader, he became acquainted with the works of Chesterton, Belloc, and C.S. Lewis whose Christian teachings led him to aspire to become a Catholic. But as we know so well, life is not that straightforward. The devil was not going to give up his prize possession so easily. The forces of evil will always try to ensnare us again. They will always work to their utmost to pull us back to our former entrapments and make us believe that we cannot get out of them. Pearce's experience highlights this so poignantly. He writes, "The pagan and the Christian could not coexist. Of necessity, one must survive at the expense of the other. For a short while it seemed that the pagan within me was resurrected. It fought for supremacy of my soul..." Yet, God's good graces won out and Pearce is now a fervent Catholic who loves his faith and speaks about it throughout the world.

With the extreme secularization of our world today, with a vast number of people seeking alternatives to God for an instant fix and with the general decline in Christian belief in the West, we are experiencing a dramatic increase in demonic activity. Forces of evil are out to deceive the entire world. And as one spiritual writer has noted, "The devil is the master marketing agent; he packages sin in neat, attractive bundles." So we must be vigilant and trust in the Lord, in his great love and care for us, manifested in his Sacred Heart and his Divine Mercy. How can we make a difference in this turbulent and sin-soaked world of today? What does the Sacred Heart of Jesus want from us now? The answer is: TO LOVE HIM. He will use the fragrance of our love to combat and destroy the evils and darkness surrounding us today. +

This talk on Sacred Heart Spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on March 6th, 2016. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, April 3rd at 4:00 p.m.