

Bow Down in His Presence

By Bevil Bramwell, OMI MARCH 6, 2022

We are at the First Sunday of Lent, which ought to remind us that the **first thing we need to get straight in life is our relationship with God.** These days, the Almighty is often overshadowed by many of life's pressing undercurrents. So it becomes of great importance that we pay careful attention to the particular set of readings the Church has chosen for us today.

“Bow down in his presence” are the final words of the reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. Bowing down in the presence of God is the appropriate posture for one who knows that he or she is not God. It is not an expression of servility, but a recognition of reality. **This is the door that opens up for us the way to living the life of faith.**

When people think – consciously or unconsciously – that they are somehow equal to or even greater than God, they try to turn everything they desire into the sheer necessities of life, as the Devil wants Jesus to do in the Gospel. But Jesus answers the Devil with the words of Scripture, from the Book of Deuteronomy, “It is written, man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” This sets everything in proper perspective; God first, and then the necessities of life.

Interestingly, God’s “word” is emphasized because God’s words are a form of His presence. Even as we trace all these textual references, we should also keep in mind that Jesus is the Incarnate Word. What we have here is more than a hint that **we might spend some time reading the Scriptures – God’s words – and thereby strengthen ourselves against temptation during Lent.**

There are also those – we see it every day on the world stage – who think that they are divine and so spend their lives looking for power and glory – the attributes of God. When the Devil challenges Jesus to worship him in exchange for power over all of the cities of the earth, Jesus again simply goes to

Scripture, because God has already spoken on this very question: “you shall worship God alone and him alone shall you serve.” This is another reference to **Deuteronomy, the Book of the “Repeated Law.”** Moses was listing God’s requirements for his people.

Lastly, **there are those who test God’s patience out of spite.** The Devil wanted Jesus to throw himself down, in effect risk suicide, and force God to bear him up through his angels. If Jesus died at the wrong time, God’s plan for mankind would come to nothing. Jesus had an answer from Deuteronomy for that temptation too: “you shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

With this third answer to his temptations, the Devil departs, foiled by the truths about how mankind lives before God, as contained in the Old Testament and pronounced again by Jesus Himself. **The Devil will return at the Last Supper to whisper in the ear of Judas, but for the moment, he has been defeated.**



It’s interesting that St. Thomas Aquinas comments that **most of our temptations do not come from the Devil but from our own egoism. That is the real trouble with thinking that we are like God. Remember that this was how the Devil tempted Adam and Eve in Paradise: “You will be like gods.”**

N e v e r t h e l e s s , t e m p t a t i o n s a r e a n i n e s c a p a b l e p a r t o f l i f e . T o r e c o g n i z e t h i s i s a l r e a d y t o b e o n t h e p a t h t o r e s i s t i n g t h e m . And we have to be conscious of the power of temptation in everyday life, not just in exceptional moments. The events of Jesus’ “ordinary” life – his quiet years, working privately, in his family home in

Nazareth – as well as his public ministry, throw light on how we can live a faithful life. Christians ought to appreciate both kinds of faithful living and practice them, day after day, even if no one notices. God notices – and approves.

The foundations of human life are, of course, very much in the hands of God. It is God who grants increase in the crops (the theme of the First Reading); God is our Refuge (Psalm); **God has given his angels charge of over human beings – “They will guard you in all of your ways.” (Psalm) These are all things to bring back into our thoughts and prayers during the trials of daily life because they offer us inexhaustible help.**

Besides these reminders of what it means to be a human being, there is the teaching that lies at the center of the readings. In the words of Saint Paul: **“you must confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.”** This saying has pride of place in the hierarchy of truths that the Church lays before us today. It leads to the glorious promise of Christianity. If you do these things, then “you will be saved.” Do we truly appreciate the full extent of that promise?

We cannot all become contemplatives, at least not in the usual sense (although it would be great if more of us did). But even contemplatives do many things in the course of their day. So they learn to live in a contemplative state when they are washing the dishes, plowing the fields, caring for their brothers or sisters. In fact, they do the so-called mundane things even better because at every moment they bow under God’s mighty hand.

“Bow down in His presence.” And a Blessed Lent!

*Image: *The Temptation of Christ by the Devil* by Félix Joseph Barrias, 1860 [Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma]

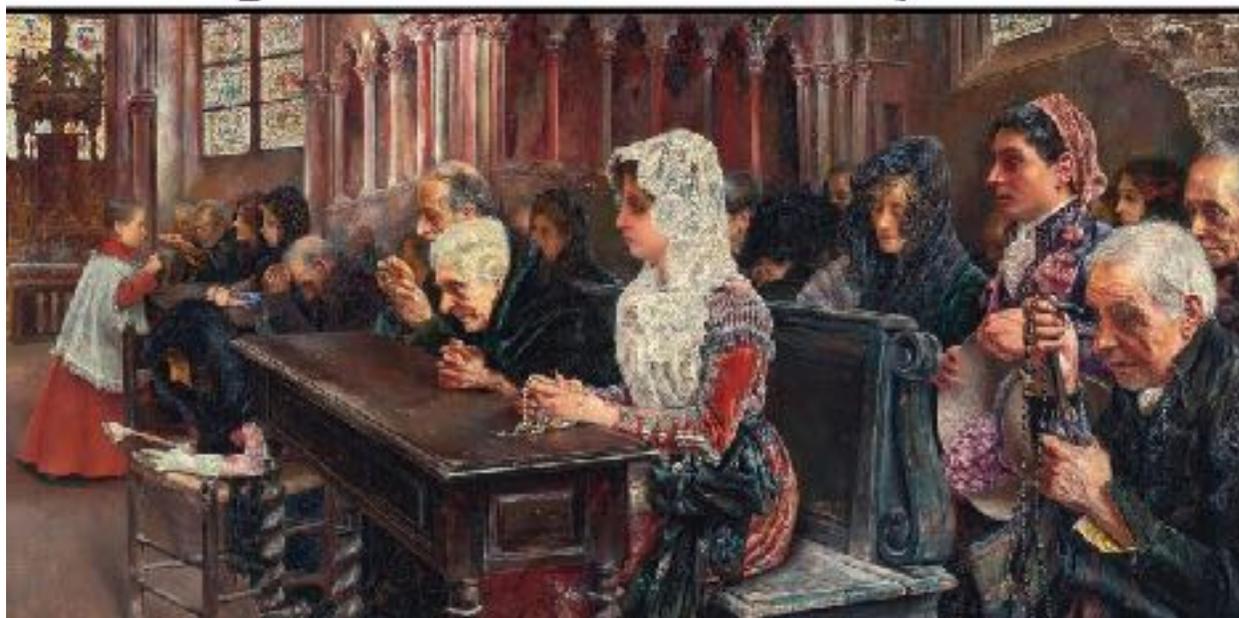
United to the Mystery of Jesus in the Desert

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Fr. John Zuhlsdorf

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Preparation for Sunday Mass



With the “Gesima,” pre-Lent Sundays we added a layer of context to our contexts: Roman Station churches. Each day of Lent has, by millennial tradition, an assigned church in Rome. On weekdays, people gathered at a nearby “collect” church and then processed singing penitential litanies and hymns to the “stopping” church, or “statio” where the Sacrifice of the Mass would be celebrated. The texts of the Lenten Masses in the *Vetus Ordo* are often connected to the locations of the Roman Mass. On this 1st Sunday of Lent, once the entry point into this solemn season, it is appropriate that Mass be at the primatial church of the City, the Bishop of Rome’s cathedral, St. John Lateran, for centuries the residence of the Popes. Since it is a Sunday, not a fasting day in

Rome, there is no Collect church. We should pay attention to these Roman Stations and, as pilgrims in spirit, visit them in our minds and hearts each day. This is part of our Roman Catholic identity. This is the way.

The 1st Sunday of Lent was once the season's beginning. Several days were added to round out the number of days before Easter. Hence, we might look at this as an entry way into a great building, such as Rome's cathedral, the "Mother and Head Church of all the churches in the City and in the world." From Ash Wednesday through Saturday, we are in Lent's narthex, the entry or antechamber to the body of the church. "Narthex" comes from a Greek word for a "scourge." This was the place for non-believers, catechumens and penitents. Thus, we can think of the 1st Sunday as the threshold into the church, or rather, our annual Lenten retreat.

Taking the entrance theme forward, in the *Introit*, the entrance chant sounded as the sacred ministers enter the sacred space, we hear from the same Psalm 90/91 which Satan quotes while tempting the Lord in the desert. It is repeated at various times during this Mass. Though the Enemy cites it, the psalm describes well the return of a sinner to God, which applies to us, though not to Christ.

One of the features of this Lenten Sunday is the Tract, again, Ps 90/91, that substitutes the excluded *Alleluia*. This Sunday it is particularly long, which reflects that, once upon a time, entire psalms were sung instead of just a few verses. This is why I recommend that, when something in an antiphon catches your mind, look at the whole context. It could be that that verse was just a signal to people who really knew their psalms well. It's the whole psalm that is intended to be presented, a couple of verses being the hook.

The Gospel is from Matthew 4. You will recall that the Lord was baptized by John the Baptist in the previous chapter. The Holy Spirit descended on Christ and the Father's voice was heard

from heaven. He had not yet begun His public ministry, and he goes into the wilderness to fast and to pray. As Matthew 4:1 puts it, “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” “To be tempted... in order to be tempted.” The verb form of Greek *peirázo* (“tempt”) used is *peirasthénai*, an aorist passive infinitive, which has the force of “to have something done to one,” hence, “in order to be tempted.” It wasn’t an accident. The Devil didn’t just accidentally bump into the Lord. This was a show down between the Good with “the Bad and Ugly.”

What the Lord did in going into the wilderness was purposeful, of course. We are told it was for “forty days and forty nights,” during which time he fasted. The number calls to mind the time of the flood, after which the Noahic covenant was made between God and Noah. It calls to mind the Mosaic Covenant, when the Jews were in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Christ was the New Moses.

The “Tempter” (*ho peirázon*) came. It is not a coincidence that in our Holy Mass we have the repetition of Psalm 90/91, for it was also used by Rabbis in their own form of exorcism.

Why did the Lord go into the wilderness for the purpose of being tempted and attacked by the Enemy? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* helps us out. “538. ... **Jesus rebuffs these attacks, which recapitulate the temptations of Adam in Paradise...**” Christ is the new Adam, an Adam who is faithful to God and who did not fall to temptation.

What were the temptations of Adam in the garden and how do they line up with the temptations of Christ in the desert?

In Genesis 2, God had forbidden Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of *paradeisos* (“orchard”) or even to touch it, lest they die. The serpent came, Hebrew *nahash*, and Adam failed in his role as steward of the Garden, to protect all that was within, including Eve, the pinnacle of material creation. Christ did not fail. In the Tract from Ps 90/91 we will have just

sung before the Gospel reading, “*Super áspidem et basilíscum ambulábis, et conculcábis leónem et dracónem...* You shall tread upon the asp and the viper; you shall trample down the lion and the dragon.”

The three-fold temptation by the *nahash* of our First Parents is captured in the description of the forbidden tree (Gen 3: 6): The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.

These are the three root causes of all sins, as described in 1 John 2:16: “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.” “Lust of the flesh” is the disordered desire for pleasure, such as eating something that is forbidden. “Lust of the eyes” is the desire to possess that which doesn’t belong to us. It is generally true that people come to desire what they see. This is why we should maintain “custody of the eyes.” Remember: You can’t unsee something. “Pride of life” is the disordered self-love that results in pride, vanity, the desire to put ourselves in the place of God.

Therefore, the Tempter comes to the New Adam in the wilderness (not a Garden), terribly hungry and thirsty (not satisfied with every good thing the Garden had). **The Lord’s temptations were essentially the same as those of Eve in the Garden: change these stones to bread to satisfy your appetite (“the tree was good for food” which is “lust of the flesh), worship me to possess all the world (“delight to the eyes” which is “lust of the eyes”), and show how wonderful you are in everyone’s full view by throwing yourself from the Temple (“pride of life” which is to displace God by putting yourself in the center of your universe).**

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

540... By the solemn forty days of Lent the Church unites herself each year to the mystery of Jesus in the desert.

We are now in the wilderness, like the People with our New Moses, our new Adam, to do battle with the Devil and the threefold concupiscence that resulted from the Original Sin of our First Parents. What does Holy Mother Church give us as a battle plan for this *anabasis*? Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These three mighty weapons of the spiritual life are the counters to the three-fold temptation of the Garden and the wilderness. Fasting works against desire to satisfy lust of the flesh. Almsgiving weakens the desire to possess things inordinately. Sincere prayer is the remedy for pride.

All of these go to the heart of the matter: denial of self. What did the Lord say? “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Hence, daily prayer, fasting and almsgiving along with acts of sacrificial love is the program for our Lenten discipline, *disciplina*. Consider that, by the end of Christ’s Lent and Triduum He was literally on that Cross having given up everything, even His clothing. Our Savior had even handed over His Mother. He was utterly alone so as to be utterly for us.

Yet, here we are together, not at all alone, in Holy Church, clothed in the garments of baptism, washed clean in His Blood. We have others to encourage us and to encourage. Mary, faithful at the Cross, extends her protecting mantle over us all from the foot of the Cross and from her heavenly queenship. In battling the “pride of life” let us begin our Lenten discipline with gratitude.