

Last month I spent a few days in Las Vegas. I know what you're thinking, but I did not go there to gamble. The Diocese of Las Vegas invited me to speak to their priests and deacons about the liturgy. We all spent a few days in a hotel far from downtown with no slot machines in view. To me, it didn't matter. I have other temptations, but gambling is not among them. I don't even buy lottery tickets. I figure that if I gamble, somebody is going to make money, and it won't be me. I shared these thoughts with a friend before I left on that trip, and he said the same thing. But when he went to Vegas, he spent time at the hotel pool. He was not proud of this; he admitted he wanted some eye candy, and he felt that that was wrong.

The temptation to lust is very common. In fact, our society holds it up as something admirable. Advertisers rely on our lust to purchase their products. People dress provocatively to attract the attention of others. It can be a very private temptation: You can look saintly while you think lustful thoughts.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists love as the first among the passions, and this may surprise you, but it says that passions in themselves are neither good nor evil (1767). We will feel love and hatred, desire and fear, joy, sadness and anger. They are just part of human life. They can help us intuit what is good and suspect what is evil. Those passions become good or evil once we start thinking about them, once we do desire them and act on them.

In today's gospel Jesus talks about losing control of passions. Anyone who looks at another with lust has already committed adultery in the heart, he says. Feeling love is one thing. That's normal and good. But desiring adultery, that is something else.

Everyone gets unwanted thoughts. By themselves they are neither good nor evil. But it's wrong to entertain impure thoughts, to let our lusts occupy our minds and control our actions.

That Jesus devoted part of his sermon on the mount to this theme indicates that even his own disciples had to manage their emotions. Just because they followed him around every day did not eliminate temptations.

Sometimes we don't even notice the difference between lust and love. St. Thomas Aquinas offered a useful definition when he said, "To love is to will the good of another." When we just want our own satisfaction, that's lust.

We all find some temptations easier to manage than others. That should tell us that the Holy Spirit is present in our lives and able to help us in those areas where we fail. With the help of the Spirit we can channel our passions toward good things, praising God for the beauty of the earth, and bringing the best into the lives of others.