

1st Sunday of Lent

In the first temptation, the devil asked Jesus to turn rocks into bread. Jesus was fasting forty days in the desert. He could have cheated. No one would have seen it. We too are tempted to sin in private—to perform actions or hold opinions no one else will know, but are clearly wrong. They may take place in our home, at work, or when we drive a car. When no one knows what we are doing or who we are, we are tempted to sin. Even if no one else knows, we know, God knows. Sinning in private diminishes our virtue and deprives us of the strength God gives the upright of heart.

In the second temptation, the devil asked Jesus to throw himself down from the parapet of the temple to show that God will rescue him. We too are tempted to take risks. Sometimes we eat and drink the wrong things or in the wrong amounts. Sometimes we drive too fast or with insufficient attention. We say harmful things to people we love, thinking they won't mind. We take risks in our relationships with others, with ourselves, and with God. It may seem as though no harm is done, but we put ourselves in ever greater peril, and we neglect the care we owe to others.

In the third temptation, the devil asked Jesus to covet all the kingdoms of the world. Sometimes we want more glory, more adulation, more money, or more possessions. When we succumb to these sins of pride we may keep other people from using their gifts and create relationships built more on domination than on respect.

Now, you could argue that these three temptations may also drive people toward doing what is good. When we hunger for justice, we can find solutions in private. When we take risks, we can create new opportunities. When we accept authority, we can improve society. All this is true. But we sometimes use virtues to rationalize our vices.

Eve did this in the garden with Adam. She saw the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. All those are good motivations for taking action. But in this particular context, she did what God had asked her not to do. The real poison of temptation is that it makes us think we are choosing something good when in reality we are choosing something evil.

For forty days and forty nights Noah remained in the ark to move humanity from sin to salvation. For forty days Moses fasted and prayed to beg God's forgiveness after the chosen people created and worshiped a golden calf in the desert. For forty days Elijah fled for his life in the desert on the strength of spiritual food. When Jonah warned, the city of Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days, the people repented of their sin. After his baptism, Jesus fasted forty days to prepare for his public ministry.

My brothers and sisters, we have begun our forty days of fasting and penance. They help us scrutinize the choices we make to discern if they cause good or harm. Let us seek forgiveness for our sins and prepare our lives to avoid the three temptations: cheating in private, taking irresponsible risks, and coveting what others possess.