

# De Souza: Nature of devil's sin still holds lesson for us



Temptations indulged, temptations resisted. On the first Sunday of Lent we heard about the devil's tempting of Adam and Eve in the garden, to catastrophic effect, and the devil's tempting of the Lord Jesus in the desert, to salvific effect.

The first Sunday of Lent always recounts the Gospel of the three temptations; the account of Jesus being tempted by the devil to give way to hunger, to exploit His divinity for spectacle, to seize worldly power by paying obeisance to the "prince of the world." Venerable Fulton Sheen characterized these temptations as "three shortcuts" to avoid the Cross.

Jesus faced these temptations and victoriously resisted the wiles of the evil one. He thus reverses the story of Genesis where Adam and Eve would fall to the serpent's promise to "be like gods." Jesus, the new Adam, born of Mary, the new Eve, is God. There is no fruitful tree in the desert, but there Jesus is looking ahead to the saving tree of the Cross; He will not avoid it.

The learned Swiss priest and theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, would say "the *ernstfall* (decisive moment) of Christianity is the Cross of Christ." The devil's pre-emptive efforts in the desert to avoid this *ernstfall* raises the question of the decisive moment of evil. What was the *ernstfall* of the fallen angel?

The fall of the devil and the nature of his sin invites us to consider the essence of evil. The Catechism puts it strongly, that the sin of the fallen angels was the radical and irrevocable rejection of God and His reign (CCC 392).

But why did Lucifer fall? Why was there a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve? Why was Satan in the desert to tempt Jesus?

Angels are rational creatures without bodies, pure spirits. They have the intellect and free will to choose good and avoid evil. The Catechism (#391) quotes the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) that "the devil ... (was) indeed created naturally good by God but became evil by (his) own doing."

What did he do?

A recent lecture here in Kingston, Ont., sponsored by the Thomistic Institute, attempted to give an answer to that question. My friend from McGill University, Professor Douglas Farrow, visited Queen's University to speak about the ancient tempter in the lecture entitled "You Shall Be as Gods." The Thomistic Institute is a new venture aimed at introducing the Catholic intellectual tradition to institutions of higher learning. As usual, Farrow was wide-ranging and insightful in his analysis.

What does it mean to "be like God"? There are two ways to understand that. Farrow explains that to "be like God" is living with, in and for God. To the contrary, it is "not by being God or by setting up one's own will as an idol in place of God's."

"The autonomy proper to the creature," continued Farrow, "is a sharing in God, not a supplanting of God." Lucifer, like all rational creatures, was meant to be like God, to share in His life. The temptation is similar, but substantially different, not to share in Him but to supplant Him.

The autonomy proper to the Creator is to will into being the ideas of His mind. Farrow proposes the fall of the devil began with the realization that "he could not will into actual existence what he thought."

Farrow draws upon the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien to further elucidate this point. The creation account in Tolkien's mythopoeic novel, *The Silmarillion*, offers Tolkien's understanding of the devil's sin. Farrow explains:

"The 'something' that the devil desired and yet fell in pursuing was the creative power of (the Creator) by means of which he aspired to 'bring into being things of his own.' "

Thus, the *ernstfall* of the devil was his desire for the autonomy proper to the Creator. He wanted not only to share in God's life, but to do what only God can do, to give life, real existence, to his own ideas. The devil rebelled against the created order of nature; he wanted to be the author of nature.

The nature of the devil's sin is not a matter only for the past, nor is it a temptation reserved only to angels. Man, too, is tempted to rebel against nature, to be its author as God is its author, to will into being the ideas of his own mind.

This is most clear today in the grasping to redefine the meaning of marriage, of biological sex, even of life itself. It is seen also in the exploitation, rather than stewardship, of the environment.

The temptation is ancient and new, to will into existence one's own reality – like the fallen angels – supplanting the Providence of God. But because we cannot give being to our ideas as God alone can do, we instead corrupt that which He has created, including ourselves. That might well serve as a working definition of sin.

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