

Facts versus Truth

Homily for the First Sunday of Lent and the Rite of Election 2020

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

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Peace be with you! Each year we begin Lent by hearing about Christ's temptations in the desert. The version of Christ's temptations presented from the viewpoint of St. Matthew is particularly graphic. "Jesus was led by the Spirit in order to be tempted by the devil." Why? Why would Jesus be led by the Spirit in order to be tempted by the devil?

Because when good bumps up against evil then the lie of the devil is exposed. Theologian and spiritual writer Father Paul Murray, O.P. puts it this way: "Satan has all of the facts but none of the truth."

That is what is operating in the three temptations of Christ. Satan knows that Jesus as Son of God can turn stones into bread. Satan knows that Jesus is all powerful and has no need to prove his divine nature by throwing himself off the parapet of the temple. Satan knows that Jesus being the son of God is already omnipotent and has no need to dominate the powers and principalities of this world. Satan has all of the facts. But he has none of the truth.

Satan lacks the truth that the greatest hunger is not the hunger for physical bread but the spiritual hunger for love – a love that ultimately flows from God. Satan lacks the truth that the greatest power comes not by our acrobatic feats but by love – a love that is so powerful it includes our enemies. Satan lacks the truth that the deepest satisfaction comes – not from our political popularity in the kingdoms of this world – but by the unconditional love of our Heavenly Father. Satan has all of the facts but none of the truth.

Note well, on the Third, Fourth and Fifth Sunday of Lent, those preparing for the Easter sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist, undergo a series of scrutinies where they grapple with sin in their life and through our prayers as a worshipping assembly become more deeply disposed to the forgiveness and mercy of God.

For those of us already initiated into the mysteries of faith, the Sacrament of Penance gives us the opportunity to walk on a parallel path with our "elect" today, turning away from sin in our own life and turning towards the happiness that comes from God's merciful love in the midst of our brokenness.

Yet whether preparing for entry into the Church, or renewing our spiritual life as a long time Catholic through the Sacrament of Penance, we want to heed the warning of these temptations of Christ that mark the beginning of Lent: Satan has all of the facts and none of the truth.

Satan knows our sin. Satan knows our failings. Satan knows our weaknesses. Satan has all the facts. But he has none of the truth and that truth in one word is love, the love God has for each one of us, the love God pours out to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the truth of a love so powerful Jesus even descends into hell – the most forsaken parts of the universe – so that this offer of love is available to even the seemingly condemned, if their hearts are open.

Satan has all of the facts but none of the truth. God on the other hand has all of the truth and cares not about the facts. The truth is that God does know our sins, but he doesn't really care. Dare I say he may find our sins boring. But Satan? Satan cares a lot about our sins. That why he keeps reminding us of them especially in our daily temptations. Satan reminds us of our weaknesses. Satan reminds us of our failings. Satan discourages us from our spiritual pathway. He steals the good we would do and keeps it for himself. That is the basic sin: the corruption of the good, the stealing of the good, the separation of the good we do from its source: God's love.

Indeed, the great medieval writer Dante Alighieri suggests all sins relate to a failure to love. He likens the spiritual journey to climbing a steep mountain. The first three of his deadly sins: Pride, Envy and Wrath reflect too little love. The last three of the deadly sins: greed, gluttony and lust are a kind of loving things too much. The middle deadly sin, sloth, is really a complete laziness and lack of any love.

May we confidently follow Jesus into the desert this Lent! Whether we are among the elect undergoing the Lenten "scrutinies" in preparation to join the Church, or a long time Catholic renewing our spiritual life in the Church through the Sacrament of Penance may our focus be on God's love. God's love for us. Satan has all of the facts and none of the truth. God has all of the truth and cares not for the facts. Why? Because if our hearts are open, his love will turn us away from sin and towards his love. Love. That is the ultimate truth of the spiritual life with God both now and forever. Peace be with you!