

Today's theme is obvious: Temptations. Mark Twain said that the best way to get rid of a temptation is to give in to it. That sums up the fall story about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It tells the story of the very first sin, the original sin. This reading is also the story of every sin, about every person's loss of innocence.

Haven't we all experienced the same things as Adam and Eve? There is a time of clear conscience. Then, comes a temptation, the urge to taste the forbidden, to experience the unknown, to grasp for the illusion of maturity.

Maybe it happened when we had our first smoke, our first drink/drug, maybe our first theft or maybe even our first infidelity.

The promise of temptation was that we would become godlike, somehow more mature and we gave in. It promised one thing but delivered something else and we experienced the fall. At that moment, we lost something and realized that we were naked. We came to see how fragile, suggestible, limited, weak and how easily tempted we are as our sin distanced us from the God we once knew so well.

As the Catechism says, the essence of that original sin was the attempt by Adam and Eve to be like God but without God. The heart of every sin is the desire to be like God but without God.

We all have experienced the innocence of the Garden, the temptation and taste of forbidden fruit and then the fall when we realized that we were naked and in need of grace. The fall is not just a moment in Genesis but in every life.

We are too apt to forget that temptation to sin will rarely present itself to us in its true colors, saying, "I am your deadly enemy, and I want to ruin you forever in hell." Oh no! Sin comes to us like Judas, with a kiss; with outstretched hand and flattering words. The forbidden fruit seemed good and desirable, but they lost Eden.

*As one Hollywood star put it, "How could it be so bad if it feels so good?"

The Gospel reading is about temptation but with a different ending than the Eden story. Jesus went into the wilderness of Judea and there He also was tempted. But here the result was victory. Jesus was tempted in the desert three times and three times He won.

Something we should note, however, is that Jesus was truly human, Jesus was tempted, and he had power over temptation. It gives us hope, because we are human, we are tempted, and we can have power over temptation just as he had.

We are told that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. Did you get that? He was led by the Spirit. He was doing exactly what God wanted him to do, and still he faced temptation.

We tend to think, when we face temptation, that God must have abandoned us or there must be something wrong with us, or else we wouldn't be experiencing temptation in our lives.

That's not true. Even good people experience temptation. Even people whose lives are led by the Holy Spirit experience temptation. There's an important distinction I want to make. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, but it wasn't God who tempted Jesus.

God doesn't tempt you to sin; he doesn't try to entice you with evil opportunities. God's purpose is not to tempt us, but to give us power over temptation.

These temptations Jesus experienced are temptations we all know well. Homilies interpret them differently. But maybe we can see them as some of the temptations of Lent.

The first temptation is to turn the stones to bread. Why fast during Lent? We all know the lure of this temptation in a society driven by consumption. Jesus quotes Scripture to give a great truth, "We do not live by bread alone."

There is more to us than what we eat, wear or drive. There is a place inside us that one writer has called the "hole in the soul," a place only God can fill.

To keep a serious Lent with its fast and abstinence isn't old-fashioned. It is very modern, a declaration of independence from the grip of consumption. Giving up something for Lent is not about self-punishment but about a freedom that liberates the soul and makes space for God.

The second temptation is to jump from the Temple, to compel God to do something for us. God needs nature to work on – we have to do our part. The lie says if you're going to pray, forget about the difficult work of repentance and conversion of life. Go for the quick fix, cheap grace, instant results, "microwave spirituality – loopholes in the bible.

Jesus quotes Scripture to say, "You shall not tempt the Lord, your God." There is no express lane to redemption without repentance. There is no way to bypass the need to change how we live in order to experience grace in our life.

The third temptation is to seek the kingdoms of the world in the illusion that fulfillment comes from power and control. It is the temptation is to dominate others by worshiping our own ego.

We see the results of this in those who discredit us or making others feel small. All humility is gone, as one has to be the center of attention. Blowhards. We are not tempted to rule the world, but we can be tempted to rule our own little part of the world.

As we saw in Genesis and the gospel: Temptation often offers something that it can't really give ... something that only God can give. Temptation will say to you, "Do this and you'll be happy.

Do this and you'll have peace of mind. Do this and you'll feel good about yourself." But the devil can't give you happiness, because it isn't the devil's to give.

He can promise you the world, but he can't give you the world, because it really isn't his to give. Only God can give you happiness. Only God can give you peace of mind. Only God can give you a sense of well-being.

So, understand this about temptation: It promises more than it can deliver. As the saying goes, "If it sounds too good to be true it probably is too good to be true."