

CHRIST IN HIS MYSTERIES

SCARCELY was Jesus baptized, the Gospel tells us, than He was led by the Spirit into the desert. The sacred writers use different expressions to signify the action of the Holy Spirit. According to St. Mark, Jesus was "driven." What does this term signify if not the vehemence of the Holy Spirit's action over the soul of Christ? And to what end was He thus driven into the desert? *Ut tentaretur a diabolo*: "to be tempted by the devil." That is the testimony of the Gospel itself.

Is not this an extraordinary thing? The Father has just proclaimed that Jesus is His beloved Son, the object of His complacency; the Spirit of Love rests upon Him and behold "immediately": *statim*, this Spirit drives Him into the desert there to be exposed to the suggestions of the devil. What a mystery! What, then, can such an extraordinary episode signify in the life of Christ? Why does it thus occur at the opening of His Public Life?

In order to understand the depth of this mystery, and before commenting on the Gospel account of it, we must first of all recall the place that temptations holds in our spiritual life.

The Divine perfections exact that every rational, free creature should be subjected to trial before being admitted to enjoy future beatitude. It is needful that, standing in God's sight, this creature should be placed in the face of trial and should freely renounce all satisfaction of self in order to acknowledge God's sovereignty and to obey His law. God's sanctity and justice demand this homage.

This choice, glorious for the Infinite Being, is for us the foundation of that merit which the Lord rewards with heavenly beatitude. The Council of Trent has declared that it is God Who saves us, but in such a way that salvation shall be at the same time a gift of His mercy and the reward of our merits. Eternal life will be our recompense because, having had to choose, we resisted temptation in order to cleave to God; undergoing trial, we remained faithful to the Divine Will. Gold is tried in the furnace; constancy in the midst of temptation reveals a soul worthy of God.

Such is the noble condition of every free creature.

The angels were the first to be submitted to trial. Although we do not know exactly in what this trial consisted, we do know that it was of a nature corresponding to the condition of angelic beings.

Remember that the angels are exclusively spiritual beings. Their acts are not, like ours, measured by time. Moreover, these acts possess a power, a range and a depth such as no human act can attain. Being pure spirits, the angels do not reason; with us, the extreme mobility of our imagination, this sensitive faculty joined to the corporal organism, presents to our choice a number of particular enjoyments of which the variety retards the action of our intelligence and will; we pass from one enjoyment to another and perhaps we afterwards return to the one which we had at first decided to reject. It is not the same for the angel; having an altogether spiritual nature, he knows no hesitation; in him, the acts of intelligence and will bear a character of plenitude, of fixity and irrevocableness conferring upon these acts an incomparable strength.

No human existence, however prolonged it might be, could attain, by all its operations put together, the power, amplitude or intensity of the single act by which the angels had to fix their choice in the midst of trial.

This is why the fidelity of the good angels was so pleasing to God; this is also why the sin of revolt of the rebellious spirits possessed a gravity which we cannot measure and of which we are incapable. Their depth of knowledge which permitted them to act in full light imbued this single sin with such malice that Divine justice had to punish it by an immediate sentence of eternal damnation.

For us, the acceptance of trial and resistance to temptation go on through our whole life here below. Daily we have to struggle against corrupting seductions, and to be patient in the contradictions willed or permitted by Providence: *Militia est vita hominis super terram* (Job. VII, 1).

But this gives us each day, too, a magnificent occasion of steadfast fidelity to God. A soul who, from the hour when she first takes consciousness of her actions until the moment of being separated from the body, should never have given way to a deliberate fault; who, placed between God and temptation capable of turning her away from Him, should always have freely chosen the Divine will, that soul would give immense glory to God. Why is this? Because in each of her acts, she would have proclaimed that God alone is her Lord. Happy this soul "that could have transgressed, and hath not transgressed; and could do evil things, and hath not done them!" (Eccl. XXXI, 10) For the Lord will reward her magnificently:

"Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. . . ." (Matth. XXV, 21).

The first man was subjected to trial. He faltered, he fell away, he preferred the creature and his own satisfaction to God. He drew all his race into his rebellion, his fall and his chastisement.

That is why it was necessary that the second Adam, Who represented all the predestined, should act in a directly contrary manner. In His adorable wisdom, God the Father willed that Christ Jesus, our Head and our Model, should be placed in the face of temptation, and, by His free choice, come forth victorious in order to teach us to do the same. This is one of the reasons of this mystery.

There is a deeper reason, a reason that intimately links this mystery with that of baptism.

What, in fact, did Jesus say to the Precursor when the latter refused to fulfill his ministry of penance toward Christ? "Suffer it to be so now. For so it becometh us to fulfill all justice" (Matth. III, 15). This justice, as we have seen, consisted in Jesus undergoing the sum of expiation decreed by His Father for the redemption of the human race: *Dare animam suam redemptionem pro multis* (Matth. XX, 28; Mark X, 45). From the time of Adam's sin, the human race was the slave of Satan, and it is from the hands of the Prince of darkness that Christ Jesus is to save it. "For this purpose, the Son of God appeared, that He might destroy the works of the devil": *In hoc apparuit Filius Dei, ut dissolvat opera diaboli* (I Joan. III, 8). This is why, as soon as He has received baptism by which He is marked as "the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sins of the world" (Joan. I, 29), and snatches all the flock from the power of the devil, the Word-made-Flesh enters into the lists with "the prince of this world" (Joan. XIV, 30); this is why the Holy Spirit immediately drives Him into the desert, as the scape-goat was formerly driven out laden with all the sins of the people: *Ut tentaretur a diabolo*.

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