

## 1<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT – A (2011)

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With our observance of Ash Wednesday a few days ago, we have entered once more into this holy season of Lent. The ashes, our penitential purple vestments, our acts of special prayer, fasting and almsgiving—all remind us of our need to confront the brokenness and sin that exists within every one of us. And in case we wonder where that frailty, that weakness in temptation comes from, all three of our readings on this first Sunday of Lent remind us in no uncertain terms.

First of all, we cannot help but notice the active presence of the evil one—Satan. Our reading from Genesis has him appear under the guise of a serpent, while the gospel presents the devil himself coming to Jesus in the desert to tempt the Lord to subject himself to the devil's power. Does it make any sense today in our highly advanced and technological world to still claim to believe in the devil? It most certainly does, despite the skeptics who dismiss the very idea of Satan as the product of an overheated medieval imagination. The ancient Scriptures repeatedly affirm the existence of the devil, and our modern-day, contemporary Church does the same thing without hesitation. Recent popes, including John Paul II and Benedict XVI, affirm that teaching as does the Catechism of the Catholic Church which speaks of how God created all the angels to be good by nature. However, God also gave the angels free will (as he did for us)—and Satan and the other evil spirits are those angels who (of their own free choice) “radically and irrevocably rejected God and his reign” (CCC 392).

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the Church's teaching on the reality of the devil and evil spirits in general. A few years ago the Church revised and updated its ritual for exorcism—the freeing of someone from the influence of such spirits. And earlier this year saw the release of the movie “The Rite”—based on a book of the same title that tells the true story of a California parish priest who, at the request of his bishop, went to Rome to receive training to be an exorcist. The book is excellent—I highly recommend it for its fair and objective treatment of the reality and the process of exorcism. One of the important points made is that before a bishop will permit such a ritual to be used, he will make sure that all possible medical and psychological explanations for the person's unusual behavior have been ruled out. Exorcism is to be used only as a last resort. Again, the book is very good. The movie is also well done, although Hollywood has taken some artistic liberties with the book as you might expect. Still, the movie does treat the subject fairly and with respect, although it does contain a few rather intense scenes that would probably make it unsuitable for youngsters.

So why am I spending so much time talking about such morbid things like the devil and exorcism? By the way, some have asked me if our own Archdiocese of Dubuque has an exorcist. To be honest, I do not know. All I know is that if we do have one, I'm not it—and that suits me just fine! Seriously, I speak about these things because they are real. Some may be embarrassed by the Church even talking about such things, let alone believing in them—but embarrassment or a belief that we are too sophisticated for such beliefs is hardly an argument to disprove them. Jesus' experience of temptation in the desert was not a figment of his imagination, nor was St. Matthew merely speaking in terms of an allegory or metaphor. Nor can we deny the reality of sin and evil in the world and how they came into the world as the result of the sin of our first parents as described in our first reading from Genesis. The Catechism affirms that, while the author of Genesis may have used figurative language in his account, he affirms “a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man” (CCC 390). This first act of disobedience, this “original sin” (to use the traditional language) affected not only our first parents but all of human history has been impacted as well. In our second reading, St. Paul affirms this by saying that “through one man sin entered the world, and through sin, death.” What's more, our first parents were tempted, were goaded into that rejection of God by that serpent—a figure of that same evil one who later would unsuccessfully tempt Jesus in the desert.

When we look seriously and honestly at the world around us, and even more so when we look seriously and honestly at ourselves, who would dare deny the existence of sin and evil? Obviously, we are much more than that—the goodness and the grace of God shine forth in countless ways and especially through countless people, including ourselves. But we also know we are far from perfect, that we struggle against and sometimes freely choose to give into temptations to sin. Does this automatically mean we are possessed by the devil and therefore need an exorcism? Of course not. Those extreme cases are really quite few and far between. But we do need to confront our weaknesses, to strengthen ourselves against temptation, and to seek pardon and penance when we freely choose to sin.

Prayer and the sacraments are our best and most effective weapons in our spiritual arsenal. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask our Father to "lead us not into temptation." The Catechism suggests another translation: "do not let us yield to temptation" which better reflects the truth that God never tempts us; rather, we recognize our need for his strength. We then pray "but deliver us from evil"—evil not as some vague or abstract concept, but rather the evil one. Again, we humbly recognize our need for God's grace and protection, and we trust in his merciful love to provide that protection.

The devil is real; sin and evil are real. God's revealed word tells us so, and frankly our own experience affirms that as well. But though we need to have a healthy and balanced awareness of those realities, we can also be assured of God's saving help if we want it. Pope John Paul II reminded us that Satan's primary work is tempting us to evil...but he cannot force us to do evil against our own will. In other words, the evil one mainly has power or influence over us to the degree and only to the degree that we allow it. Infinitely better for us, of course, is to ally ourselves with Jesus and seek his strength and grace to reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises as we affirm every time we celebrate baptism. Our opening song today and throughout this Lenten season says it well: "Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary—pure and holy, tried and true. With thanksgiving I'll be a living sanctuary for you." A sanctuary is a place of safety, security and refuge—where we are protected from all that could harm us or lead us astray. Jesus is that sanctuary for us and will certainly protect us from sin, evil and the evil one...if we would just acknowledge our need for him and invite him in.