

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent Year “B”

February 20-21, 2021/ Cathedral of Saint Paul

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

Temptation is crafty and some memories never fade. I was a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader, a neighbor in Kindergarten owned a baseball card that I deeply desired. I made my move– “I have a deal for you–I will give you all of these cards for just one of yours.” It was a handful. He paused a bit, then agreed. He went inside to retrieve the card, when suddenly his mother appears at the door, wagging her index finger at me. Busted! Worst of all, I knew it while waiting for him to retrieve the square piece of cardboard with an image and the player’s name in the upper left–George Herman (Babe) Ruth.

I think the temptation to own a vintage card was too much for me. The devil didn’t ‘make me do it’–it was clearly of my own free will! And my conscience got to me even before Mom appeared. Yet, there is no denying the force of temptation in our lives, and yes, some of it does come from outside. A good starting point is the reality of evil. Do we see it in the world? The answer to this is painfully obvious—we see it all the time, and we even see it in ourselves at times. From where does this evil come?

While God cannot create a person evil, he did bestow upon us the tremendous gift of our freedom. How we use or abuse that gift forms the basis of our relationship with God. Sin entered the world through our first parents—this is the constant witness of Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. As *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy. [Cf. Gen 3:1-5; Wis 2:24] Scripture and the Church's Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called "Satan" or the "devil". [Cf. Jn 8:44; Rev 12:9]<sup>1</sup> Because we are irrevocably linked with humanity through our shared human nature– as creatures, we too were affected by this tragic choice.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Para. #391.

The existence of the devil is mentioned hundreds of times in the bible, and repeatedly throughout the Church's Tradition. It is the proverbial 'no-brainer'. No, the Church is not scaring people into belief, but rather sharing the saving message of Christ.

We want to localize and dissect evil, but it is not that simple. This bothered St. Augustine for years before his conversion: "I sought the source of evil, and I found no explanation."<sup>2</sup> As powerful as the tug towards evil can be, we mustn't despair. The power of evil is not absolute.

Evil is a tremendous mystery, because God could have chosen to protect us from all evil, not allowing us to fall into sin. He did not. But the universe is filled with mystery. I am marveling at the photographs coming from Mars and the Perseverance Rover. And that's a great name for the rover, as it completed a 300-million-mile journey begun last July!

We need a balanced understanding of the reality of evil in our lives and in the world. Thus, while it is naive to say that each sin is due to diabolical action, still as Pope St. Paul VI reminded us: "it is true that those who do not keep watch over themselves with a certain moral rigor are exposed to the influence of the 'mystery of iniquity' cited by St. Paul which raises serious questions about our salvation."<sup>3</sup>

It is easiest to see his existence in the very denial of evil and sin in our society. This alone shows forth the evil one's influence. Today's Gospel is proof that Jesus underwent all that we experience as pilgrims on the way. He was not immune to the temptations that keep us in bondage to sin. Whether it be it a temptation to despair if our studies are a source of struggle or frustration, or the temptation to want to exercise too much control over own futures, Jesus did not succumb. His valiant witness provides us the strength and resolve to continue for another day.

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions VII, 5, 7, 11 etc.*

<sup>3</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Confronting the Devil's power" Wednesday General Audience, 15 November 1972