

18. February 2020

“To resist temptations”

James 1, 12-18

Blessed is anyone who perseveres when trials come. Such a person is of proven worth and will win the prize of life, the crown that the Lord has promised to those who love him. Never, when you are being put to the test, say, 'God is tempting me'; God cannot be tempted by evil, and he does not put anybody to the test. Everyone is put to the test by being attracted and seduced by that person's own wrong desire. Then the desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and when sin reaches full growth, it gives birth to death. Make no mistake about this, my dear brothers: all that is good, all that is perfect, is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light; with him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow caused by change. By his own choice he gave birth to us by the message of the truth so that we should be a sort of first-fruits of all his creation.

The great theme of temptation is continued in today's reading! The intention of the Apostle James is to clear up all the false images one may have of God.

God does not lead into temptation, he never wants to do anything bad to man. But this world has become dark because of sin and lives far away from God. Now, the Lord uses these circumstances, and allows temptation as a test! All who trust Him will pass through the temptations, with the help of His Grace, and will thus be strengthened in faith and perfection.

There is, then, a great difference between saying that God leads into temptation or that he allows temptation to happen. In the texts of the Old Testament, this distinction is sometimes not very clear. We must distinguish between God's active will, which is always directed towards the good (*"Make no mistake about this, my dear brothers: all that is good, all that is perfect, is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light; with him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow caused by change"*) and his permissive will, which is what God allows to happen, such as temptations.

This difference, not always recognizable at first sight, probably led the French bishops to change the corresponding passage in the Lord's Prayer, so as not to say: "Lead us not into temptation" (as Jesus' words originally say); but rather: "Do not let us fall into temptation". It is understandable that people want to avoid

misunderstandings; but others argue that a prayer that has been prayed like this for so long should not be changed, that they are the very words of the Lord; and that it would be better if its meaning were explained.

The apostle James insists in today's text that temptations come from within ourselves; from our own misguided concupiscence. When we do not overcome them, they "give birth to sin," and, if we remain in it, they engender spiritual death. This is what we call the "life of sin".

The warnings of James should impel us to take seriously the struggle against sin, without giving up; and to strengthen oneself with all spiritual means to resist it. It is not for nothing that the Lord places the crown of victory before our eyes, because by resisting sin, we are showing Him our love! In fact, love is the deepest motivation in this battle, because sin can be so seductive that it really takes effort to remember that the Lord does not like it. In those moments, we must simply hold on to God.

We are not far away from Lent. This occasion lends itself to remind that even the so-called venial sins and voluntary imperfections prevent us from growing in love on our way with the Lord.

Let us suppose, for example, that I have the habit of being unkind at times and letting myself go a little bit; and I also have the tendency to be capricious. Although that is not what I want and I regret it, I do not make an effort to work on it and improve it. In this way I prevent growing in love, because kindness in all its greatness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Another example: Let us suppose that I spend a lot of time with worldly things, beyond the legitimate moments of recreation. In fact, I know that I should not devote so much time to the internet and other forms of unnecessary communication. I could use this time better, either directly for the Lord or for meaningful work; but my curiosity does not allow the change, and I do not really want it either, because I have already got used to it and somehow I seek - or at least allow - distraction.

It is easy to understand that this kind of rooted habit does not allow certain dimensions of the following of Christ to unfold; rather, our voluntary imperfections put a brake on it.

Now one could give many more examples - also from community life - such as when one takes certain "liberties", which are not foreseen or have not been previously agreed upon. These "liberties" become shackles, which do not allow us to move forward.

Without falling into an anxious scrupulousness, we should allow ourselves to be challenged by today's text to better order our spiritual life in the coming Lent and to examine it. This can be very helpful for the goal of our spiritual life: to grow in love for God and for people!