

21. February 2021

“The creeping temptation to worldliness”

Mk 1:12-15

And at once the Spirit drove him into the desert and he remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after him. After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the gospel from God saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.'

In previous years, I had already meditated on the three temptations of Jesus in the desert.

Temptation is a subject that must be dealt with again and again, for as long as we are not yet in eternity with God, we will be confronted with it and will have to resist it. It is a comfort that Holy Scripture makes it clear to us that the Lord uses temptations to strengthen us (*cf. Jas 1:2-4.12*). So it is not just painful circumstances that we have to live with; the Lord uses them to form us.

Today I would like to turn my attention to a kind of temptation that is perhaps not always perceived as such. It does not come aggressively in evil thoughts and feelings with the obvious intention to lead us away from the commandments of God. No, it is more subtle and works in the long run, so to speak.

I would like to call it the “creeping temptation to worldliness” of Catholics!

But how does this worldliness come about, because nowhere do we find in Holy Scripture that we have to adapt ourselves to the world! On the contrary, we are expressly warned (*cf. Rom 12:2*) and spiritual teachers repeatedly draw our attention to the temptation that comes from the world.

Perhaps a word of St. Paul gives us a key to understanding: “*For me everything is permissible; maybe, but not everything does good.*” (*1 Cor 10:23*)

Perhaps we pay particular attention to the first part of the sentence: “*For me everything is permissible*” and always find reasons to open ourselves to worldly practices, if they are not directly harmful to our souls. One then participates, so to speak, in everything in the world that is not under the prohibition for a Catholic.

The “harmless pleasures and distractions” become a matter of course, one takes part in the media offers, etc. The more this happens, the more a spiritual perception of the right measure is lost and habits and attachments take its place. When asked about this, people will always justify it and classify dissenting opinions as too harsh, in the worst case as rigid.

What is being overlooked is the second part of the sentence: “*but not everything does good*” or, according to an older German translation: “*but not everything makes you pious*”. The spirit of piety leads us to do what is pleasing to the Lord. This is a supernatural point of view and causes us to place our actions under this premise. In this way, our soul becomes more and more connected with the Lord and the “harmless pleasures” increasingly lose their appeal and become unimportant.

In the former case, when we align ourselves more with what is permissible and make use of the worldly offers with increasing naturalness, our soul is also influenced by them. It begins to feel at home in them, its thoughts are influenced by them. “*For words flow out of what fills the heart*” (Mt 12:34), so says the Lord. Conversations will then turn more and more often around worldly things. In time, you don't even notice it anymore. The religious is no longer the center, but it belongs only on the periphery and the focus shifts.

What happens in the individual, unfortunately also occurring in religious congregations, is also often perceptible in the church as a whole.

This “creeping worldliness” can occur in many different ways. It can occur with a conviction that, for example, the Church must adapt to modern times in order to enter into conversation with the people of today. One thinks that theology, morality and other areas of church life need an “up-to-date” in order to be able to have a say. A discouraging example can be seen in many newly built churches, which are more practical and useful than beautiful and sublime, adapted to modern perception. Many sermons, up to the top of the church, are primarily concerned with “the things of this world” rather than the salvation of the soul. Secular issues come to the fore that might as well be handled by politicians.

This “creeping worldliness” weakens Catholics considerably, because their spiritual discernment becomes clouded. One loses one's distance to the world because one is involved in it oneself. The consequence can be that one not only practices what is permitted, but also no longer opposes the illicit with sufficient determination. We no longer serve the evangelization of this world, but we become

worldly. But then we have nothing more to proclaim to the world. Even more: we withhold from it the testimony of the Gospel, which the world expects from us Christians. In a way, we deceive our fellow men, because a worldly Christianity is a kind of sleeping pill that prevents us from waking up to God and changing life.

It follows that we should keep in mind especially the second part of St. Paul's statement, to be on the lookout for what is pleasing to the Lord, and to use the "permissible" only so wisely that it does not become a trap for us and weaken our spiritual life so that it perishes and we succumb to worldliness.