The World, the Flesh, and the Devil

Have you noticed the significance of the number three in the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness? He endures three temptations: to tempt God by throwing himself from the temple, to turn the rocks into bread, and to bow down to Satan. These temptations are the same three we renounce at baptism: the World, the Flesh and the Devil. Jesus’ temptation to throw himself from the top of the temple to see if God will save him is a temptation concerning power, and power is the great way of the World. Satan tempts Jesus to put God to the test; in other words to assert his power over God rather than submitting himself to God. This is the temptation of ‘the World’ for it is the way of the world to seek power and assert ourselves over all—even God. The temptation to turn rocks into bread is a temptation of the flesh. There is nothing wrong with eating bread, but Jesus had committed himself to fasting, and the temptation was to give in to the flesh. The third temptation was to bow down and worship Satan and so win the whole world.

These three essential temptations: the World, the Flesh and the Devil are Satan’s counterfeit Trinity. They are the un-holy Trinity. Getting ready for Lent means taking the unholy Trinity seriously, and going out into the wilderness for battle is one way Christians engage in that warfare every year.

It is exciting to realize that the very thing that Satan is trying to counterfeit with that fearsome threesome, the World the Flesh and the Devil, is the antidote to his poison. In other words, the way to counter the un-holy Trinity of the World, the Flesh and the Devil is to resort to the Holy Trinity.

Let me explain: The Way of the World is the way of human power, human planning, human reason, human wisdom. It is the way that puts Man first and assumes that human life and human perception is all there is. This is countered by the third person of the Trinity--the Holy Spirit.

The Way of the Spirit runs totally counter to the Way of
the World. The one who lives by the Spirit walks by faith, not by sight. The one who lives by the Spirit relies on supernatural direction and guidance day by day. Living by the Spirit means walking a way of weakness and trust in God rather than man. The way to walk in the Spirit is through immersing ourselves in prayer, Scripture and the lives of the saints. 'The Flesh' means not only the obvious sins of the flesh like sexual immorality and gluttony and drunken-ness, but it also means living as if this physical world is all there is. Living by 'the flesh' means that a person assumes there is no heaven or hell, and that when they die there is nothing. As a result they can 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow they die.' Living by the flesh sounds crude and vulgar, and it can be, but it is also possible to live a very refined life according to flesh. A connoisseur or a person with refined and delicate taste may also live by the flesh. As the Holy Spirit counters the Way of the World, so the second person of the Trinity counters the Flesh, for it was God the Son who took human flesh and so conquered the realm of the Flesh Lord. Jesus Christ, God from God, Light from Light, took human form and in that fleshly form overcomes the temptation to live by the flesh. Through baptism he is in us and we are in him. Our flesh in his flesh and his flesh in ours. Through all the sacraments the world of the flesh is spiritually conquered, but most importantly through the Eucharist where we receive the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Our Lord. There His flesh and blood overcome in us the World of the Flesh.

The third member of the Un-Holy Trinity is the Devil. The Devil is the Lord of Misrule. He is the Lord of Chaos. He twists and distorts all good things. He soils and ruins all he touches, and yet through his overwhelming pride he would set himself up not as creature, but as creator. He wants to be God, and his main temptation to mankind is for us to set ourselves up as gods as well. The Devil or the Divine. Which will you have? The Devil wants to make himself divine and so overthrow the Almighty. As the Holy Spirit counters the Way of the World and the Son who came in the flesh overcomes the Flesh, so God the Father overcomes the Devil. Of course the Devil and God are not equal opposites. The Devil would like to imagine that he is the opposite equal of God, but he is not and never will be. He is a false God. He is nothing but a creature in rebellion against his maker. During Lent we identify ourselves with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. We enter into the wilderness of Lent to battle with him against the un-holy Trinity of the World, the Flesh and the Devil. Seeing these three as an un-Holy Trinity will help us be more intelligently engaged in the battle. We will battle the Way of the World with a new reliance on the Holy Spirit through prayer, Scripture and the lives of the saints. We will battle the temptations of the flesh with the physicality of the sacraments. Finally, we will overcome the Devil, the Father of Lies, by an increased love and devotion to God the Father. The best way to increase this devotion is by loving obedience to his commands, and by a more fervent and profound praying of the 'Our Father.'

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