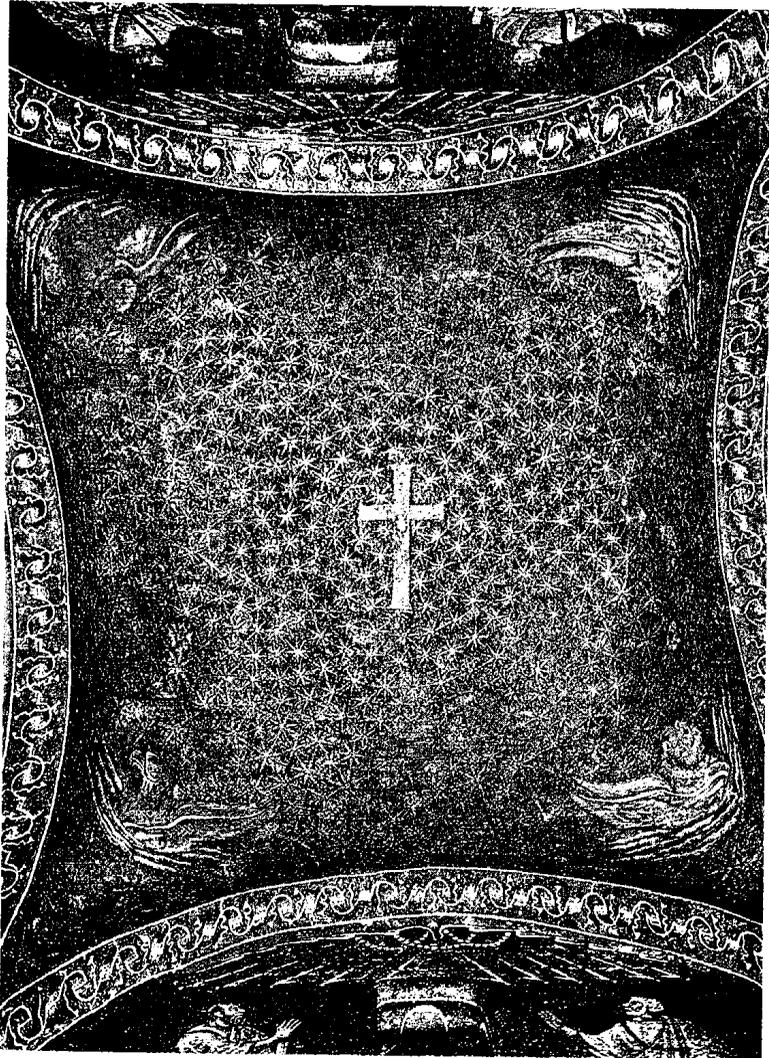


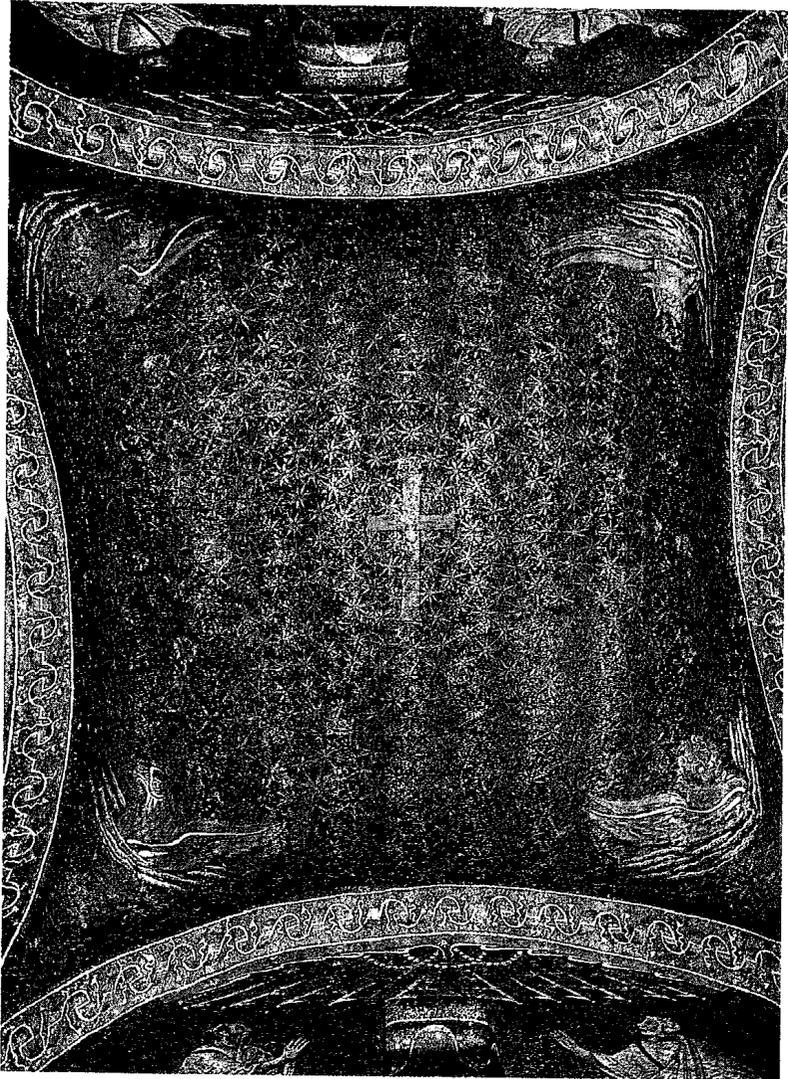
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On the Mount of Temptation

Meditations on the Fasting and Temptation of the Lord

Father Matta el-Meskeen

I

“And Jesus, being full of the Holy Spirit returned from Jordan” (Lk. 4:1).

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S descent on the Lord in his baptism was an anointment of exquisite quality and significance, being the power particularly poured out from above to prepare Christ's flesh for his work of redemption, which began right after baptism. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to encounter the prince of this world and master of sin.

The Apostle Peter refers to this anointment and to its conspicuous power as a testimony, and he links it directly with Christ's ministry: “How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed of the devil: for God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

The word *anointment* is a theological term denoting total consecration to the service of God and dedication to whatever is

sacred. At the time of Christ, anointment was never administered except to high priests, kings or prophets or the sacred vessels of the temple. This sacrament took place by anointing the body with oil which was poured out from a horn called the "horn of unction," otherwise referred to as the horn of salvation. So the whole of anointment in its various types and rituals was symbolic of Christ as the "true horn of salvation": "And his father Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied saying, 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David'" (Lk. 1:67-69).

In the case of Christ, anointment was administered directly from heaven. Present within Christ's person were all the potentials and the qualities to render him the appropriate recipient of anointment as high priest, king, or prophet, who bears the spirit of prophecy: "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10).

The psalmist here comments on this super-anointment thus: "Therefore God has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows" (Ps. 45:7) and associates the anointment with gladness, just as it took place at the Jordan, where God administered it to his Son with all pleasure: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17).

The "ages of everlasting righteousness" began, effective with the anointing of Christ at the Jordan, according to what God had previously revealed to Daniel in a vision: "to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy one" (Dan. 9:24).

The sign which would accompany the advent of the ages of everlasting righteousness and the anointment of the most holy one is referred to by the Prophet Isaiah as the alighting of the

Holy Spirit, which he describes as signalling “the year of the Lord’s favor.” “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Is. 61:1,2).

With Christ’s anointment, this strange apocalyptic seal had been unsealed, and the prophecy had been fulfilled. The day had come to which there was no end; the everlasting day of the eternal year of righteousness. The Holy One had been revealed with no difficulty. Thus when Christ stood in the synagogue and was asked to read a passage from Scripture, by divine dispensation, he opened up the scroll of Isaiah at the place of the prophecy and the seal, where it reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...etc.” He then folded the scroll after he had deciphered its code saying, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!” (Lk. 4:21). And thus also the saying was fulfilled, “For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10).

But how could Christ be filled with the Holy Spirit while being God?

The answer to this question is of extreme importance; for it is considered the foundation on which our religious thought concerning faith in the person of Christ and the message of redemption is built. For Christ did not receive the Holy Spirit at the Jordan for his own sake: he is one with the Holy Spirit in essence without any division, for he is the Son of God. However, just as it was said at first at his incarnation that he was born of the Holy Spirit and of a virgin, it is likewise said here that the Holy Spirit descended on him once again after baptism. For the matter involves his incarnation firstly and secondly, and his

incarnation involves our salvation firstly and lastly.

In order to grasp this idea fully, we may consider the words of St. Severus of Antioch:

'It is the Holy Spirit which belongs to me that has rested on me. Why should I then be called Christ? Is it not because I became man?'... It is through divine economy that the Holy Spirit alighted on Christ on account of his humanity. Otherwise the Holy Spirit belongs to him naturally by reason of his godhead. So that which alighted on him is not foreign to him but is one with him in essence and has abided with him since before all ages. (St. Severus of Antioch, *Letter to Pope Theodosius*)*

The following excerpt from St. Cyril of Alexandria clarifies this concept further:

It is sheer hypocrisy that someone should believe that the Word of God was in need, within his essence, of the aid of the Holy Spirit. For it is clearly evident that the Holy Spirit rested on him, humanly speaking, when he (the Word) began to reveal to us the economy of the flesh¹... for he did not receive the Holy Spirit into his own entity, for the Holy Spirit is in him just as he is in his Father. Rather, he received him for our own sake, for Christ was counted among those living on earth. Hence, just as he received

* All the quotations in which the page number is not indicated are translated from the Arabic.

¹ The terms *by economy* or *by dispensation*, were used by the church fathers in general and by the Alexandrian fathers in particular as a concise expression denoting God's policy and wisdom in all his trinitarian acts, particularly in his incarnational ones by which he consummated our redemption and salvation. These actions were performed for our own sake and not for the sake of the Son of God as a divine person.

By analyzing the word *economy* according to its usage in Greek we find that it denotes "pastoral building." We wish that this term would be reintroduced into our theological terminology, for it is one of extreme precision and depth and also connotes a whole theological heritage.

the Holy Spirit as man, we see him giving us the Holy Spirit as God.... If then this one Lord Jesus Christ who received the Holy Spirit is also he who gives him, the action is thus evident: this one Christ who received the Holy Spirit by the economy of his incarnation, also gives him, for he is God by nature. If the Holy Spirit rested on him being human, he did not do so being divine, but on us as mankind; and this Holy Spirit is from him, in him and with him. (St. Cyril the Great, *De Recta Fide*)

It should be carefully borne in mind that the Holy Spirit is fundamentally involved in the process of the incarnation and consequently in that of redemption and salvation as a basic factor from beginning to end. He attended the nativity, the baptism, the temptation and all the other signs and wonders, always testifying to Christ: "He will bear witness to me" (Jn. 15:26). He is present in the confession of faith as well: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3); and in revealing the mysteries of Christ: "He will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn. 16:14).

II

“... and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil” (Lk. 4:1,2).

IT is obvious that Christ did not seek temptation for himself. Was it not he who said in prayer, “Lead us not into temptation”? Yet, when temptation did come he did not shun it, but faced it readily, since it was for this very purpose that he had come. He even hurried it when it arrived: “What you are going to do, do quickly” (Jn. 13:27).

To this point, St. Athanasius of Alexandria comments:

For as it was not fitting for the Word of God, being the Life, to inflict death himself on his own body, so neither was it suitable to fly from death offered by others.... But this did not show weakness on the Word’s part, but, on the contrary, showed him to be Savior and Life; in that he both awaited death to destroy it and hastened to accomplish the death offered him for the salvation of all. (St. Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, 22:1,2)

Why led by the Spirit?

It is obvious that the Holy Spirit intervenes here as the main element in declaring the righteousness of Christ, and it is fitting that the testimony to Christ and declaration of his lordship does not come from him. It is the Spirit who undertakes to declare Christ’s lordship because it is the very nature of his role, for in the message of salvation, the Paraclete has a vital role to play, secretly manifesting himself from time to time without being noticed, except by those who are perceptive of the work of this meek, calm and ever-self-denying Spirit. Even if John the Baptist went before Christ in the spirit of Elijah as a voice

crying in the wilderness and as a lamp illuminating the turning roads and showing clear the crooked ways, yet his voice withdrew and its light went out the moment the Spirit of God was poured out on Christ in profusion. The Spirit still goes before Christ but in a voice which is not heard except secretly in hearts, healing their bruises, binding their fractures and dispelling their despair. His light illuminates the eyes from within, not from without—with the light of eternity which the world cannot see.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion [to sing], to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit” (Is. 61:1-3).

And why should the Spirit wish to be tempted by Satan?

Isaiah did not fail to make a subtle remark in this respect. Hear him say, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me... to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God” (Is. 61:2). It is as if he wants to say that the year of the Lord’s favor must necessarily begin with driving the enemy away, that righteousness will never be poured out unless iniquity first abates, and that the release of the captives must be preceded by capturing the oppressor.

What was the reason behind the mourning of the mourners and the despair of the despondent in Zion and all over the world? What was the reason behind the humiliation of the humiliated and their breaking hearts, the captivity of captives and the bondage of bondsmen? Was it not because of the enemy of our race, who had reigned over us by death, and fettered us with sin, thrown us into the captivity of lust, sealed us with despair of salvation, and insulted the Most High in our creation

which is his image?

Hence, it was the Spirit who planned that this day of vengeance should be first in the plan of redemption, and thereupon Christ set out in the desert of temptation in order to hasten the accomplishment of the rest of the plan on Calvary.

But how could Christ be tempted by the devil while being God?

This question first carries us from reflecting on the temptation back to Christ himself.

The mere mention of the word *temptation* turns our thought to the meaning of sin. The Bible presents temptation in conjunction with sin in general, whether in a direct manner, where punishment follows, or in an indirect manner, where vindication follows. However, we can impute the origin of the temptation of Christ to neither of these senses. For it is a well-known fact that "God cannot be tempted with evil" (Js. 1:13) (the word *tempted* here is in the passive.) In other words God can never be led into temptation by the evil one. What then could this temptation of Christ be?

We go back once again to reflect upon the flesh of Christ. According to the faith, Christ was conceived and born without sin (original sin). Did he then become susceptible to sin afterwards? No, according to the faith this is absolutely impossible, due to the hypostatic union² between the Logos and the immaculate flesh.

² *Hypostatic union* means the real and total union which took place between the divine person or the "Word," who is the only Son of God, and the flesh he took from the Virgin, starting from the first moment of the incarnation. The flesh thus became a flesh belonging to the person (or *hypostasis*) of the Son. This union, however, did not derive from the infiniteness of the divine person or his inherent attributes by any means. The technical term is of vital importance to the Orthodox doctrine. It was St. Athanasius who first introduced it into theological terminology; and St. Cyril afterwards carried it out, and all the fathers who followed preserved it and used it to elucidate the oneness of

For this reason we also say that all which belongs to the flesh belongs also to the Word without sin, according to his dispensation. (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Second Letter to Succen.*)

And the Word became one with the articulate soul and flesh as a person... and became man. (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Letter to Nestorius, Second Excommunication*)

All people have bodies in which they live and will be resurrected; as for the Word of God, he became man to sanctify the flesh. (St. Athanasius, *Second Discourse against Arius*)

In a letter to Emperor Theodosius, St. Cyril of Alexandria shows that the effect of the divine essence on the humanity (of Christ) is a permeating one which throws into bold relief the meaning and value of the oneness which resulted from this union:

If he is in the flesh, he is also a conqueror of sin, for, by his nature and essence, he is absolutely unchangeable and victorious in everything, and all sins are away from him. (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *De Recta Fide*)

How then can we consider the body of Christ, which is absolutely free from sin, a natural body just like ours?

The answer to this question is clear. Sin is not a natural element in man's body, but is spurious to our creation, and its admittance was voluntary on our part. The incarnation of Christ by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary showed us a body just like ours as regards our human nature, but free from Adam's original and willful sin:

This body, though he took it from Mary, is truly holy. (St. nature in the union between the hypostasis and the flesh—the latter becoming divine flesh, the flesh of the Son of God.

Athanasius, *To Epictat*)

Nevertheless, the flesh which Christ took from the Virgin and united with, although it was blameless, retained all the properties of weakness and susceptibility to pain and even death. It was only free from sin:

For when he became man he did not cease to be God, neither was he ashamed of humanity for being God. (St. Athanasius, *Third discourse against Arius*)

St. Athanasius shows, in another place, that the body of Christ is even considered a perfect human model, which retained all the weaknesses of mankind but remained without sin:

For whatever is written concerning our Savior in His human nature, ought to be considered as applying to the whole race of mankind, because he took our body, and exhibited in himself human infirmity. (St. Athanasius, *Defence of his Flight*)

How then could Christ be tempted by Satan while being without sin?

Here we return to the gospel text in order to glimpse a mystical truth worthy of all consideration.

We observe that the tempter approaches all people, without exception, boldly. He violates their territory, their lives and even their seclusion and prayer; for he finds in their nature that which encourages his audacity due to their disposition to sin. The enemy even dared to violate Adam's paradise; for Adam was under God's commandment which he had the freedom to obey or break if he liked. In the nature of Adam's freedom, the enemy found what encouraged him to probe such freedom and shake it from all sides.

In the case of Christ, on the other hand, we find the reverse. That is, the violation is turned around the other way: Christ is the one who goes out to the desert to be tempted by Satan! Satan, here, is on the run, while Christ is driven by the Spirit to storm his domain and seek him in his arid wilderness, the place of his rest, the desert where there is no water.

“He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intervene; then his own arm³ brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation upon his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing⁴ and wrapped himself in a mantle. According to their deeds, so will he repay—wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies” (Is. 59:16-18).

There seems to be here nothing unusual about these simple words on Christ’s temptation by the devil; they do not arrest our attention. However, they are actually very serious and of extreme profundity, not only in their theme, but also in their nature and their far-reaching results. For though the temptation here seems to be aimed against Christ, it actually encompasses Satan himself, but from a different angle, which is all the more significant and of special concern to us in our present meditation. We find here that the temptation has a salvational action which most essentially concerns us:

When he was tempted by the devil he was patient, not that he needed to be tempted, but in order to neutralize the power of the devil. (St. Gregory of Nyssa, cited by St. Severus of Antioch)

Christ put on man’s flesh as a clothing of vengeance,

³ Christ is often figured as the “arm of God.”

⁴ The vision here refers to the flesh of Christ.

according to the Prophet Isaiah's odd imagery, so as to confront with it the enemy of our race who has disgraced our flesh and humiliated it. According to St. Paul's interpretation, "[God sent] his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3).

Yes, it was imperative that the Son of God, with this weak and suffering body which was subject to death, should conquer the devil, curb him and drive him to weakness and into Sheol: "Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come... All of them will speak and say to you: 'You too have become as weak as we! You have become like us!'" (Is. 14:9,10).

It was necessary that the nature which was conquered through Adam should be crowned with victory through Christ and destroy death. This is the reason why our Savior became man, as St. Paul says, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature" (Heb. 2:14). (Pope Theodosius of Alexandria, *Letter to St. Severus of Antioch*)

III

“And he ate nothing in those days”
(Lk. 4:2).

INSTEAD of the divine power and might which went before God in the form of fire, thunder, lightning, smoke and earthquake, as we were accustomed to in the Old Testament, we find here Christ taking the initiative to be human, humbling himself with fasting and setting out to meet the enemy in the weakness of the flesh! Is not this the amazing, unsearchable and unfathomable mystery of Christ—that after showing his humanness through his incarnation, he emptied himself to accomplish his mission through weakness and humility? Is it not astonishing that Christ should not confront the enemy with the power of his godhead openly, but as a fasting and praying man?

When the devil tempted him in the wilderness he was patient, not from a need for temptation, but for the purpose of neutralizing the power of the devil. He did not confront the devil with the power of his godhead, but triumphed over him with the body which was liable to suffering and death, so that by this body, sin should not enter the world once more, for it is through sin that death spread to all men; that by this body the impurity of sin may be blotted out; that in this body he may triumph over the prince of sin. (St. Gregory of Nyssa, cited by St. Severus of Antioch)

We would like here to draw the reader's attention to the importance of the Orthodox doctrine of the one nature of the Word Incarnate. The question which brings us face to face with

this doctrine is: Did the flesh strive alone for this triumph and salvation? And, in case it did, could that work be called "salvation"?

The unity of the flesh with the Word is an inevitable necessity, for their action is one. It is from the oneness of the flesh with the Word (that is, with the godhead) that the one act which Christ performed in the weakness of the flesh sprang. Christ "condemned sin" in a fasting and frail body which was broken on the cross "in weakness."

The condemnation of sin which Christ effected in this weakness of the flesh is actually an articulate evidence of the might of the godhead which is one with the flesh. Thus we find that the cross, which is a single action accomplished by the Word in the flesh is both called "weakness" and "power" at one and the same time. Christ was said to have been "crucified in weakness" which is "the power of God for salvation." In another place the Bible describes the deed of the cross as the "weakness of God" (1 Cor. 1:25). Could there be a better expression of that oneness?

What can the result of such a welding between this weakness and that power be other than to neutralize weakness and to annul it definitively in the flesh, that is in human nature, forever? This result appeared clearly in the flesh at the Lord's resurrection from the dead, when this oneness was most clearly manifested.

Therefore, the union between the divine nature and the human one, which resulted in the birth of the flesh, ended up in a total oneness in which there was not the least duality. For after the union, the divine and the human were no longer two natures, but one nature of the Word Incarnate, performing one act, and willing one will. This is the very one action of salvation

and redemption regarded as both weakness and power, a death and resurrection together.

We say that two natures were united, but after this union they could no longer be distinguished as two. We thus believe in one nature of the Son because he is one, even though he was incarnated and became man. (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Letter 40 to Acac.*)

While the two natures, which have come to such true unity, were different (divine and human), they nonetheless have produced the one Christ, the one Son, not that the distinction between the two natures after this union was no more valid, but the divinity and humanity perfected for us one Lord, one Christ, who is the only Son, and this by their harmony in a perfect unity that surpasses description and elucidation. (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Fourth Letter to Nestorius*)

For the sake of this flesh he combined his own will with human weakness, that destroying this affection [or weakness] he might in turn make man undaunted in face of death. (St. Athanasius, *Discourse III Against the Arians*, 29)

St. Athanasius here illustrates in plain profundity and in a clean-cut statement the fact that Christ had only one will; when he handed it to the flesh it looked weak, but its weakness, which produced redemption and salvation, turned into unexcelled power.

* * *

The flesh never worked alone, for it was one with the Word, and all its works were nothing but an expression of the will of the Word and his action. For all the works of the flesh and its

sufferings appeared at the end as saving and life-giving acts, expressing one single action, one will and one nature of the Word Incarnate.

It was not humanity alone which did these deeds as if humanity were apart from divinity, never; but divinity accepted these pains on account of the union which it shared with humanity throughout. (St. Severus of Antioch, *Letter to King Anastasius*)

How far this is from the saying of Pope Leo (of Rome)⁵ which the Council of Chalcedon adopted, that severs the works of the flesh from those of the Logos (the godhead) in such a way that shakes the concept of hypostatic union!

Every nature fulfills whatever pertains to it in conjunction with the other. The Word performs what pertains to the Word, and the flesh what pertains to the flesh. (*Tome of Leo*)

How then can it be claimed that the Council of Chalcedon derived this exposition from St. Cyril of Alexandria? And that this statement does not depart from the theological statements of St. Cyril? In fact, if we go back to Cyril, we find the very opposite:

Thus, if we say about Emmanuel that he is from a divine nature and a human nature⁶, we mean that the human nature now

⁵ We do not wish by this comparison to recollect the tragedies of dogmatic history or bring them back to our own age; we would rather overlook the past and even overlook the rigidity of the letter and of terminology, so as to attain to the excellence of the one Christ who gathers all of us into his spacious heart.

⁶ To say that Christ is *from* two natures is different from saying that he is *in* two natures. For the former, which is correct, means that the divine and human natures united to form the "Word Incarnate." But to say that he is *in* two natures means that the Word is still Word and the body is still body; they are two natures existing together. The latter doctrine is not acknowledged by the non-Chalcedonian churches, because it is far removed from the words of the Gospel text, "And the Word became flesh" (Jn. 1:14)

pertains to the Word: he is one Son. The Holy Scriptures, which are God's breath, say that he suffered in the flesh. It thus befits us to say the same and not that he suffered in the human nature⁷. This is too much to say, as if to sever the human nature of Christ from the nature of the Word mentioning the two apart, the authors thinking that the two are separate... and saying afterwards that they are not apart, and pretending to preach the correct faith.⁸ (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Second Letter to Succen.*)

St. Cyril here only speaks the same words spoken before by St. Athanasius:

For what the human body of the Word suffered, this the Word, dwelling in the body, ascribed to himself, in order that we might be enabled to be partakers of the godhead of the Word. (St. Athanasius, *Letter to Epictat*; NPNF, 2nd Series, Vol. IV, p. 572)

⁷ *Editor's note:* To say that he "suffered in the flesh" means that it is Christ the Word who received these sufferings in his own body, which is correct and has always been stressed by the fathers. This is different from saying that he "suffered in his humanity," which means that the pains were not received by Christ in his own person, but were confined by him within the human nature. There is all the difference in the world between sufferings that are bodily received by the Word in his own person and those confined by his divinity in a nature other than its own. For Christ to receive physical sufferings in his own person means that these sufferings became salvific ones: "I confess that the salvific sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ were received by him in the flesh for our own sake." "The godhead received sufferings in the flesh" (Pope Theodosius of Alexandria).

⁸ The theologians who expound the doctrine of Chalcedon claim that the principle of two natures after the union derives from the teachings of St. Cyril the Great. But when they collide with the places where Cyril proclaims one nature after the union (that is, one nature out of two) they impute to Cyril that he did not distinguish between *physis* and *hypostasis* in Greek, and they allege that what he meant by one nature was actually one hypostasis. But we strongly object to this claim; for the embarrassing question which declares it null and void is: Did Cyril ever mention even once in all his classifications that the union took place between two *hypostases* instead of two *physes*? Cyril in fact was an extremely meticulous theologian who perfectly understood what hypostasis is and what nature means.

And while he, the incorporeal, was in the passible body, the body had in it the impassible Word, which was destroying the infirmities inherent in the body. But this he did, and so it was, in order that in his taking what was ours and offering it as a sacrifice, he might do away with it, and conversely might invest us with what was his, and cause the Apostle to say: "This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53). Now this did not come to pass putatively, as some have supposed: far be the thought: but the Saviour's having in very truth become man, the salvation of the whole man was brought about. (St. Athanasius, *ibid.*)

With this flesh, which looks very frail in its outward appearance and nature, but which is actually God's flesh, Christ went forth to be tempted by the enemy. He did not fast to escape the power of the devil through hunger, but to raise the flesh to the level of the spirit, so that it might derive its power and life from the Word and not from a morsel of bread. If the devil had been subdued by the Word, the victory, then, which would have taken place at the level of the flesh, would be credited to the flesh, and therefore to us.

Thus Christ raised his flesh by fasting as an offering to God before encountering the temptation, for the physical and psychic pain which he endured in his long fast was considered in itself a sanctification for our sake and a sacrifice on our behalf.

With the forty days of fasting and utter seclusion, Christ founded the mystery of Ascetic Theology

The Lord draws our attention to sin and to the power of the devil, which surpass the limits of the flesh. He inspires us to the path we should tread so that by fasting, prayer and seclusion we

may rise to a spiritual level proportionate to this evil force: "This kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting" (Mt. 17:21).

By fasting, prayer and seclusion, the flesh ceases to call for its needs, and thus man becomes safe from drawing back. The flesh is then elevated by prayer and contemplation to the level of the spirit, and it is only then that man finds himself face to face with the devil and sin as concrete powers; he may even overpower them with the help he will surely receive from above.

So it is that Christ inspires us by his fasting with a powerful stance against sin: a languishing body and a soul totally surrendering to God, together with contempt for the vainglory of this world. It is in this way that we can confront the devil. "The ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me" (Jn. 14:30).

But up to now the ascesis of fasting is not yet considered within the bounds of Christian mysticism, for the man fainting from hunger still needs to be fed with the Word proceeding from the bosom of the Father and from his mouth, and he needs actually to live by that Word. It is then that one would be initiated into the mystery of redemption, not merely in victory over sin, but also in union with the Word when one truly raises one's body as an oblation.⁹

He accepted what belongs to humanity and the temptations with which he was tempted, so that we may walk in the tracks of him who conquered every sin. As God, he became a high priest for us through his humanity, and as a servant, he raised his pure flesh to the Father as an offering and sweet incense on our behalf. (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *De Recta Fide*)

⁹ "I appeal to you therefore, brethren... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

In ascetic theology, both the flesh, with its hunger, sweat and sickness, and the soul, with its surrender to pain and death, enter into the very core of salvation through communion in the sufferings of the Lord; and so man tastes the meaning of redemption and sacrifice. He apprehends with his soul and feels with his flesh the waning of sin in his members, the recession of the devil and the ministering of angels: "and behold, angels came and ministered to him" (Mt. 4:11).

* * *

The Fast of Great Lent

The forty days of Lent which Christ fasted entered into the church, and therefore into our lives, as a salvational work complementary to the Passion of Holy Week and the crucifixion, in preparation for the mystery of resurrection.

The church can never celebrate the Holy Resurrection with its life-giving mystery unless it first crosses the way through the forty days of Lent in which it prepares itself for the mystery of the cross. It is as if the Resurrection derives its power from the cross, and that in its turn from Lent.

The resurrection, in its perfect meaning, is a victory over death, and consequently over sin, as well as a termination of the devil's reign over man, where man receives a new incorruptible body, immortal, not susceptible to pain or weakness, and even one with the Word, the Son of God, in an eternal union and a mystery of love beyond all comprehension.

The resurrection, in this integral sense, we wait for, but in fact we receive its pledge here and now. This pledge is a true and powerful victory of the spirit over the flesh, and a reign of holiness which prevails over all the allurements of the devil and

his deception. This, however, is within the limits of suffering, weakness, unrelenting effort, fasting, prayer and the silence of seclusion in limited periods of time.

With its long seclusion, the fast of Lent deeply and secretly prepared the way in the Lord's life for the crucifixion and resurrection, where Christ actually rose in a vigorous, impassible, immortal and glorious body which far transcends the limits of the nature in which we now live:

We should know that the flesh belongs particularly to him, and it is in it that he tasted death, in it that he rose, stamped out the pride of death, and gave our race the gift of immortality. This, because he trampled death with this body, and annulled its victory. It is no longer an imperfect body of a man like us, but an exceedingly glorious body which transcends the limitations of humanity. (St. Cyril of Alexandria, *De Recta Fide*)

As for us, the fast of Lent with its seclusion, and Passion Week with its sorrows, elevate us to a state in which we visualize and are aware of the resurrection as a pledge, but not yet in its perfect form which transcends the limits of time. For even though we now celebrate the Resurrection, it is only within the confines of yearning and constant expectation and by virtue of the pledge which has been handed to us.

To Christ, the fast of Lent was a sort of preliminary scale used to measure the length and breadth of sin in a flesh on which sin cannot leave its prints of corruption. In his seclusion in the desert and arid high mountains, Christ was emotionally detached from the world and could thus see through a human body all the kingdoms of the world and meditate on and examine their false glory, their base height, their illusory permanence, and their rise and fall over the ruins of each other.

He thus felt the hugé difference between the comfortable bosom of the Father, from which he came forth, and the hard-pressed chest of the world to which he descended. By praying and frequently standing before God, the soul of Christ was lifted and elevated above the earth. It felt itself to be a grand temple of God, higher than the heavens. It measured the glory of this temple and became convinced of its high grandeur above the glories of mankind and the honors of this age.

By fasting, the flesh was elevated, through its intimacy with the spirit, above its earthly home, and it thus looked down on the earth from which it was taken, which provides man with food, drink and an illusory sustenance. Christ meditated on the dust of this earth and how it inherited the curse of sin which never ceased to sap man's strength, his worry and his love, until it made out of that earth a home for man once again. And so Christ kept aloof from the earth, her dust and her stones; for he felt within his heart the true source of man's life.

IV

“And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. And the tempter came to him...” (Mt. 4:2,3).

DIVINE inspiration in this gospel text throws into bold relief the relationship between human instincts and temptation: “He was hungry, and the tempter came to him.” Hunger is considered a natural and honest expression of physical need and is in keeping with the nature of the flesh. There is no shame or corruption in this.

But when physical need presses hard upon man, importunately and solicitously asking for gratification, all the intellectual and psychic standards fall down to the level of the flesh with its natural drives and become influenced by this solicitude in an always-exaggerated manner: physical need tyrannically overwhelms the spirit.

At the beginning, such pressure seems hard and insistent as if it were an irresistible necessity. But if the mental and psychic system does not ally itself with this exaggerated insistence, man can manage to control the flesh: instincts calm down, recede and then cease.

Physical needs are not evil in themselves, for they were created by God. But if man succumbs to their magnified importunity and consigns himself to their rebellious leadership, they can lead him to transgression and drop him into the grasps of the devil, who would inhabit these physical needs and use them as a weapon against man.

V

“... and afterward he was hungry” (Mt. 4:2).

THE Bible's saying that Christ was hungry opens for us a wonderful theme for meditating on the nature of Christ. It did not say, as it did about Peter, that when he became hungry, “he desired something to eat” (Acts 10:10).

The Bible indicates by “hunger” the action of physical need in Christ's flesh, which is in accordance with the normal limits of human nature. But it never mentions any inclination toward appetite on Jesus' part. Such an inclination towards desire would denote an alliance between the psychic and spiritual makeup on the one hand and instinct on the other, which would result in a drop to the level of the earth:

The sage Cyril [the Great] said in his second *Thesaurus* that fear, hunger and the like were accepted¹⁰ by Christ, but they never held sway over him. (St. Severus of Antioch on St. Cyril the Great)

It is clear here that the nature of Christ was not only free from sin but also never disposed toward sin. That his flesh was without sin is undebatable, by virtue of the Holy Conception and the pure Virgin Birth. But as for the flesh being disinclined to sin, or, according to St. Cyril's expression, never dominated by the obsession with physical needs—being hungry but never controlled by hunger—this is an action which transcends human nature, on account of the total union between the flesh and the Word. For though the Word accepted the sufferings of

¹⁰ The Word's accepting sufferings in the flesh was not compulsory due to his union with the flesh, but voluntary and with pleasure; for he suffered and was crucified according to his own will.

the flesh and its weakness, he never accepted any inclination toward sin.

Whosoever says that the flesh to which the Word was united was impassible to the sufferings which were without sin, that is to say, the flesh was only a shadow or similitude, is excommunicated. And whosoever says that the Lord's flesh is perishable, that it might accept sin, is excommunicated. (Pope Theodosius of Alexandria)

Here the efficacy of the doctrine "one nature of God the Word Incarnate" stands out clearly. For divinity and humanity expressed together in Christ a new nature of man which could not be manipulated by the perverse passion resulting from the solicitude of physical need.

The Word, that is the Logos, did not coerce the flesh or compulsively restrain it from inclining toward appetite, as if it were of a different nature that was foreign to him. Harmony was the result of the union which had taken place between the Word and the flesh hypostatically. The flesh assumed the virtue of the godhead and its perfection:

We do not say that Christ, by means of a pleasant flesh which was insensitive or cut off from feeling, became without propensity to sin, but that, on account of perfect virtuousness and a flesh that was born without passion, he had no desire for sin. (St. Augustine, *Op. Imerf.* IV 48)

This shows that Christ's flesh was strengthened by its union with the godhead while retaining all its natural human properties. This is illustrated by St. Athanasius in this manner:

How then can we believe that the body, ransomed and quickened by the Word, had made an addition to God the Word that had

quicken it? For on the contrary, a great addition was accrued to the human body itself from the fellowship and union of the Word with it. Instead of being mortal it had become immortal [by resurrection]; and though an animal body, it had become spiritual; and though made from earth, it entered the heavenly gates [by ascension]. (St. Athanasius, *Letter to Epictat*; 9)

Thus in the body of Christ, man's nature, which had previously sinned and become subject to pain and death, was recapitulated,¹¹ in perfect union with sinlessness and the disinclination to sin. Not that sinlessness and the disinclination to sin were something separate from the flesh or external to it, supporting or controlling it from the outside, but that they essentially belonged to it.

If sinlessness were not shown in the nature that had sinned, how then can sin be condemned in the flesh? (St. Athanasius, *Against Apollinarius*, ii,6)

Thus within the body (of Christ), the power of death and that of immortality were re-assembled. From them, the power of salvation inevitably emanated when the power of immortality conquered the power of death and the body was triumphantly resurrected. This nature, with all its properties intact, was transferred to us when Christ gave us his flesh with its victorious power.

It was necessary for our salvation that the Word of God should become man so as to make man's body, which had been subjected

¹¹ *Recapitulation* is the Latin equivalent of the Greek *anacephalaiosis*, a summing up, or summary. The term occurs in Eph. 1:10, where it is stated that God summed up all things in Christ. Irenaeus (c. 130—c. 200) made it especially his own, interpreting the term both as the restoration of fallen humanity to communion with God by the incarnation, and as the summing up and completion of the entire *Heilsgeschichte* in the incarnation (*Dictionary of Christian Theology*).

to corruption and diseased with lust and pleasure, belong to him. Being alive and life-giving, he annulled corruption, for in this way sin is mortified in our flesh. (St. Cyril the Great, *Letter to Succen.*)

And so in the light of this doctrine, one could say that Christ actually handed us a flesh which has the power of sinlessness and disinclination to sinful passion, so that we might be fortified forever inside this flesh. We are fortified not only at the resurrection (a fact that fills us with hopeful strength), but also when this flesh itself, which we receive by faith, becomes an inward pledge of the new life which we taste here and now, when we imitate Christ. By partially partaking of this victory, we actually experience the joy of salvation and the delight of triumph through a mystery revealed in our hearts and minds as a resurrection prior to the final resurrection.

He accepted all that belongs to mankind, including temptations, so that we might now walk in his steps, he being triumphant over every sin. As God, he became a high priest with his divinity, and as a servant, he raised his pure body to God the Father on our behalf like sweet incense. (St. Cyril the Great, *De Recta Fide*)

It was thus said that the holy flesh, which became a special property of God the Word, was the initial point of God's action by which he annulled the pride of death, destroyed the power of Satan, held Hades in captivity, broke its iron bolts [sin], and offered us this holy flesh and blood as a commencement and pledge of eternal life. (Pope Theodosius of Alexandria, *Letter to St. Severus of Antioch*)

“... And afterward he was hungry”

Divine inspiration here gives a hint that the body held out for quite a long time without calling for its needs, not by repression

but by virtue of its nature. This fact implies the extraordinary loftiness of that nature one way or another (“...and afterward he was hungry”) which, as we said before, was due to its union with the Word. For if St. Paul, by reason of the grace which was in him, could say, “For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound” (Phil. 4:12), and “I pommel my body and subdue it” (2 Cor. 9:27), how much more could Christ.

The flesh in which he was born was full of the perfection of the godhead. (St. Athanasius to Epictat)

For this cause... because he was life and power, the body gained strength in him. (St. Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, 21:5)

The Bible is not so eager to attribute feebleness and rapid hunger to Christ, as some theologians do, in fear of Eutychianism. Neither does it take pains to throw into relief the power of his godhead over the weakness of the flesh, lest we should forget that Christ was of a human nature just like ours. Thus it says, “and afterward he was hungry,” showing the power of his weakness.

Did he not then hunger? Yes; he hungered, agreeably to the properties of his body. But he did not perish of hunger, because of the Lord that wore it. (St. Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word*, 21:7)

However, we should know that even that hunger which stirred naturally within the flesh could have been controlled and prevented by the Lord: “I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again” (Jn. 10:18). But he never did so. On the contrary, he accepted it to the end, leaving his body to

behave naturally and express all the reactions which occurred within it or caused it to suffer, in conformity with its natural properties.

He became like us except for sin; he partook in the symptoms proper to our nature and accepted hunger, for there is no sin in hunger. After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he became hungry when that nature was allowed to call for what belongs to it. (St. Severus of Antioch on St. Gregory of Nyssa)

* * *

VI

“... and afterward he was hungry, and the devil came to him” (Mt. 4:2,3).

WHEN the flesh felt hungry, Satan moved for the encounter; for he now had a key to try in a door which seemed closed to him.

Satan began his attempt when he was sure that Christ was worn out with hunger. For in hunger the devil found for himself a helper (*Synergon*) in tempting, for he knows from his experience with us that he can conquer us at times of weakness when we are forced to accept his debates and reasonings. (St. Cyril the Great, *On the Gospel of Luke*; PG 77 p. 528)

The Lord did not deem himself superior to encountering Satan; he had put on a body that was subject to death, which gave the devil an initial right to the encounter. The Lord made out of hunger, which had previously driven us to lust and transgression with all their ramifications, an opportunity for vanquishing the enemy and cutting off his relationship with the flesh once and for all.

This indivisible Christ performed signs and accepted sufferings according to his will, I mean the ordained sufferings in which there was no evil, which were in conformity with his humanity. By his free will he hungered when he fasted for forty days on our behalf, and thus gave Satan the chance to approach him. (St. Severus of Antioch, *Letter to Pope Theodosius of Alexandria*)

It is thus evident that the fasting and hunger which Christ accepted in the flesh were originally included in the plan and

economy¹² of salvation, for it was through them that the Word managed to face the enemy and, consequently, to face sin. In doing so, Christ brought an end to the old relationship¹³ between the devil and our own nature which had been a main key to sin, having been transmitted to us intact through Adam under various allurements:

He ate nothing during those days, and when they ended he became hungry. It was thus becoming for him who humbled and emptied himself to resist the devil who had vanquished us at first, to fight him for us, suppress him and strip him of his power. For this task he, I mean the Only Holy, came in the flesh so as to purify us, for we became partners in his perfection. (St. Cyril the Great, *De Recta Fide*)

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¹² *Economy* or *dispensation* is, as we have explained above, a theological term denoting all the works of God which he accomplished by the incarnation in order to consummate our redemption and salvation. The physical sufferings are therefore counted as "economic" work in full accordance with his divine will.

¹³ That is, the old relationship which Adam had created by his transgression, which started with eating and the lust for self-deification and resulted in death.

VII

“And the tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread’” (Mt. 4:3).

WE should not be too hasty in deciding Satan’s intention from this temptation of his. Rather, we should calmly meditate on the Lord’s answer to him. It is the Lord alone who exposed Satan’s intention and guile, which were fraught with delusion. From the Lord’s answer, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Mt. 4:4), we discover at once that the enemy was trying to instill in our nature the delusion that our life is totally dependent on the earth. He exploited hunger, which seemed life-threatening, and linked it to gratification, which consequently seemed the only means of life. In like manner, even today, he deceitfully convinces us that food is life-giving.

This seems to be a fact if we accept it hastily or without caution, just as Satan’s counsel to Adam, that by eating from the tree of knowledge he would become like God seemed valid. However, the delusion behind these counsels lies in the fact that eating, gratification or knowledge without God cannot give man life, nor can they lead him to rest. Every truth without God is a lie, and every life without his word is death. Hence, from Christ’s answer we can infer that eating earthly food alone would lead man to inevitable death. Man’s life cannot last or be preserved without the word of God which brought it into existence and quickened it.

It is notable that Satan addressed Christ as the Son of God but that Christ answered Satan as a man. The devil tried to raise the

temptation to a higher level, but Christ pulled it down to its true level at once. We thus find in Christ's answer far-reaching depth and plain simplicity.

But how was the devil defeated and his might vanquished by Christ's answer?

The devil tried, through hunger, to bind Christ to the earth so as to make it his source of life. But when he became sure of his inability to employ his power over Christ's hunger and incline him toward appetite by urging him to desire the earthly bread and live on it, he suggested that Christ, whom he found to be beyond the rule of physical appetite, should reach out for a miracle: "Command these stones to become loaves of bread."

If we note that Christ put on our very same nature, we realize that the devil was actually employing against him all the authority and craftiness which he had acquired from Adam up to Christ, and with which he had bound our nature, making fleshly instincts an inlet for exciting the passions, which are a pitfall for sin and transgression. But now the time had come to break this bond asunder and release our poor and burdened nature, the daughter of Adam, bound by the devil with weakness for fifty-five hundred years. Now it was time for Christ to put on this nature with its burdens and weakness (but to put it on without sin) so as to release it from the power of this tyrant.

The rejection of Satan's counsel by Christ while he bore our self-same hunger and abjection, elevated human nature above the devil's power and raised it from its hunched posture so that it stands upright. Christ's adherence (while he was starving to death) to the principle that the life of the flesh does not consist in bread alone but in God's word raised the Word of God above bread, raised the flesh above hunger, instinct and death, and

linked the life of the flesh to the Word of God: thus man may live by Him and in Him forever. The devil's defeat seems great indeed if we remember that sin entered into Adam by his acceptance of a single counsel, and sin reigned over mankind's nature and over the entire world by the entrance of sin into that single man. By Christ's rejection of that same counsel, Christ cut off the relationship between sin and the flesh once and for all.

We received from Christ this starving body, nonetheless alive with the Word of God, to be born from it and to live by it. Victory then entered our nature and eternal life reigned over us in spite of death and in spite of the devil. And thus the devil's defeat before Christ is one which extends to every man who puts on Christ. Though our victory seems now somewhat infirm because of the weakness of our nature, it will reach its peak when we shed this weakness at the resurrection from the dead.

When the devil tempted him in the wilderness he was patient, not because he himself needed temptation, but in order to annul the power of the tempter. He did not fight the enemy with the power of the godhead, but triumphed over him in the flesh, which was susceptible to pain and death, so that by this flesh sin might not enter the world once again (for it is through sin that death spread to all), that by this flesh the impurity of sin might be blotted out, and the prince of sin triumphed over. (St. Severus of Antioch on St. Gregory of Nyssa)

Christ thus raised fasting and the physical sufferings which it entails to an act of divine economy and completed with it a considerable portion of the work of salvation. Thus the fasts in the Orthodox Church are rather tinged with a theological significance, that they might no longer be an individual struggle

against sin and the devil, but a participation in a guaranteed victory which the Lord has perfected on our behalf, yielding for us fruits which it transcends our potential to reap.

All the works of his humanity we attribute to the economy of the Word's incarnation. (St. Cyril the Great, *De Recta Fide*)

For he is the Word of God who, by dispensation, condescended to the limits of humanity for our own sake... and thus became a path for our nature to resurrection. (St. Cyril the Great, *De Recta Fide*)

He never sinned, and there was no deceit in his mouth; for it was necessary that the nature which was defeated through Adam should as well be crowned with victory... It is a great thing that the Lord should triumph over Satan. Had he not triumphed over him in the flesh, had he not accepted all that befell his body (without sin) which is consubstantial with our body, and had he not accepted sufferings or mortified death in his flesh, the sting of death, which is sin, would have never been broken, nor would the power of death ever have been abolished. How then can we not boast of this victory, having thus been freed from captivity? (Pope Theodosius of Alexandria, *Letter to St. Severus of Antioch*)

* * *

VIII

“Then the devil took him to the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him. ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you,’ and, ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’” (Mt. 4:5-7).

THE questions which we encounter here are: What is the relationship between this second temptation and fasting? At which part in Christ does the enemy level his arrow? And how does this second temptation relate to the first?

In answer to these questions, we first note that the gradation in tempting is significant and very profound. It reveals the devil’s scheming power and craftiness, although in its totality it does not go beyond what happens to our own nature.

We may note as well the exact nature of the second temptation: By the fasting of the flesh, and after the successful endurance of the pain of hunger in such an amazing manner, the soul is inevitably elevated to its ultimate height, entering into a state of exaltation. After fasting for forty days in total submission to the demands of the spirit, the flesh grows lighter in weight, so much so that it can move with the soul and could easily rise above the pinnacle of the temple and then alight without any danger. This temptation often occurred in the lives of the saints. Many of them actually fell into it and the devil made fun of them. After lifting them up in the air he dropped

them and they fell. However, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit carried Philip from Jericho to Azotus and back!

The temptation here is levelled at the human *soul* of Christ which is glowing with fasting and prayer. If he really lives on the *Word* and not on bread, let him throw himself from the top of the temple, and there will be no danger whatsoever, for, according to the written *word*, the angels will bear him up. We observe here that although this temptation is based on the previous one, it is in fact its very opposite. For if the first was a recession to the lust of the flesh and the bread of this earth, where man is confined within the duties and obligations of the laws of matter and has no concern other than gratifying the flesh around which his life revolves, we find that the second temptation suggests spiritual elevation of the soul, without any regard for the laws, weight or demands of the flesh. The proposal here is offered to the soul to be ego-centered and exalted beyond human limitations.

It is notable that the second temptation was most deftly adjusted and well suited to the state of the body and the soul. It took advantage of the spiritual elevation resulting from humility, fasting and prayer, in order to fling the soul away in psychological grandeur and megalomania. In the first temptation Christ prevailed in the battlefield of the flesh and lust against the pressure exerted upon him to pull him down to the earth. Christ managed to abolish these inclinations and undo the old bonds, binding the flesh instead to eternal life by means of the Word. In the second temptation, the arrow was aimed at the sphere of the soul, where the devil tried to bear down heavily on the soul, pushing it out of the confines of humility and fasting. In the first temptation, Christ warded off from human nature a left-hand stroke, and in the second one he had to ward

off a right-hand stroke¹⁴:

As Christ, having taken on 'the form of a servant' (Ph. 2:7), through humility conquered the devil, so at the beginning through pride and vain glory the serpent overthrew Adam. (St. Macarius the Great, *Hom.* 27:5)

To the question: *Did Christ have a human soul just like ours?*
St. Cyril answers:

... the Logos from God became man. We do not say that the nature of the Word was altered when he became flesh. Neither do we say that the Word was changed into a complete man of soul and body. We say rather that the Word, by having united to himself hypostatically flesh animated by a rational soul, inexplicably and incomprehensibly became man. He has been called the Son of man, not according to desire alone or goodwill, nor by the assumption of a person only... (St. Cyril the Great, *Letter to Nestorius*, Cited in: *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 76, The Catholic University of America Press, 1987, p. 39)

Another question arises: *Could the devil have had access to Christ's soul while it was elevated by fasting and prayer as such?*

The answer to this question is that the devil does not approach the soul elevated by piety as one stopping it from prayer and devotion, but as one flattering and commending it, suggesting thoughts that seem in harmony with piety and spiritual ardor. He then recommends more of these, suggesting to Christ that the thoughts be exhibited to other people for their

¹⁴ *Left-hand stroke* and *right-handstroke* are expressions used by the ascetic fathers to denote two kinds of warfare which the devil wages against the faithful, and particularly ascetics. In a *left-hand stroke* he employs the bodily passions of man to lead him to sin. In a *right-hand stroke* he employs the ascetic's sense of self-righteousness, on account of the austere practices and the virtues he attained, to lead him to pride and vanity, and then to falling into sin. (*Editor's note*).

own benefit, suggesting that Christ verify these thoughts miraculously, etc. His counsel is ever and always deceptive, for the devil aims to dispel the fervor of the soul and sever it from the source of its comfort, strength and life. Reminded of its greatness, piety and strength, it becomes ego-centric and arrogant and is alienated from God.

We find that this was actually what befell Adam and subsequently became one of the most dangerous gaps through which the devil enters to hurl away God's mighty sons. The second temptation befits the powerful. In fact, St. Luke places it at the end of the three temptations of our Lord.

“Again it is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God’”
(Mt. 4:7):

Christ here exposes the element of guile in Satan's counsel, his answer being a rule that is good for anyone who performs any work by depending on his own piety and self-righteousness, without being humble and submissive to God's counsel. Such work, in fact, counts against its performer as a temptation for God, regardless of its merit.

Tempting God here virtually means that man forces God to sanction his work and compels him to perform a miracle, and this foreshadows imminent rejection, since God does not give his glory to another.

God does not manifest his charity to those who put him to the test, but to those who believe in him. And Christ never showed any sign to those who put him to the test. (St. Cyril the Great, *On the Gospel of Luke*)

Christ thus revealed the danger latent in this counsel, in which the devil urges man to perform a deed where there is

apparent glorification of God and of piety but which actually ends up with God's rejection of man as haughty and more ambitious than his stature would allow.

But while we find Christ here completely refusing, in all humility, to perform such a miracle, which rests on self-affirmation and declaration of his deity by proof but which actually hides within its folds the sense of self-deification, we also find him, on the other hand, performing another miracle which excels this one in power, viz. walking on the sea. By comparing both miracles, we can see the great difference between them.

In the miracle where Christ walks on the sea, we find that the human soul follows the Word and is borne up by his power; for Christ walks on the sea as God and according to his will. But in the miracle suggested by the devil, we find that the counsel revolves around the human self, so as to make it the leader, while the Word would become a submissive follower, which is absolutely impossible, because it is, like all the deeds of Satan, completely subversive.

The evidence that the miracle suggested by the devil is at the level of the human self consists in Satan's words, which purport the need for external help from the angels so that no danger may threaten the success of the miracle, being an action proceeding from Christ's self. In this temptation we find Christ keeping himself safe from the trick, as, in all humility and submission to God, he refuses the counsel and renders it null and void. In this way, Christ preserved our nature from the guile of the self and its deception by the devil and thus raised the potentials of our fallen nature to their original limits. He rid it from the offense which people may find in God on account of our false piety, and immunized our nature against the lust for deification and

independence from God; for he made our nature one with him.

When we meditate on the two temptations and how, through them, for our sake, Christ immunized his body against falling prey to seduction by the devil, we realize the value of this salvational action, for through Christ's temptations we were unfettered from sin which had hitherto shackled both our flesh and our soul.

We thus understand that Emmanuel the Word suffered in the flesh, but not in the godhead [it is as if he were saying about himself]: It was necessary that I should unite with the flesh so as to loosen the bonds of sins, and I was crucified to annul the sins of all in my own flesh. (St. Cyril the Great, *Quod unus sit Christ*)

It is clear from the words of St. Cyril that the process of salvation was accomplished in two stages: the first, loosening the bonds of sin; the second, annulling sin itself. The first Christ accomplished by means of the temptations and the psychic pain which he endured in our stead, whether in his flesh or in his soul; hence the name "healing sufferings." The second he accomplished by means of the agony of death; hence the name "life-giving sufferings."

He receives them (human weaknesses) from us (by his union with the flesh of our humanity) and offers them to the Father, interceding for us, that in him they may be annulled. (St. Athanasius, *Discourse IV Against the Arians*; NPNF 1st series, vol. IV, p. 435)

For as he takes our infirmities, not being infirm, and hungers not hungering, but sends up what is ours that it may be abolished, so the gifts which come from God instead of our infirmities, does he too himself receive, that man, being united to him, may be able to partake them. (St. Athanasius, *op. cit.*)

IX

“Again, he took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Begone, Satan! for it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve’” (Mt. 4:8-10).

THE devil realized that he was defeated in the battle against the flesh and the soul. His arena became now very small, being confined to only one remaining section of man’s nature. And now Satan ran the risk and offered Christ all his power if he worshipped him.

Where did the devil aim his last arrow?

Christ came forth from the Father’s bosom to retrieve the world for submission to God and to gather the dispersed nations and lead them into God’s kingdom. This could never be accomplished except by arresting the devil, binding him and throwing him outside the world: “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out” (Jn. 12:31). But the price was very very dear and extremely terrifying: the cross. Christ knew this as did the devil.

“Why then all of this?: I am ready to give you all the kingdoms of the world without a cross; only worship me.”

It is evident that the devil here addressed the personality of Christ which was represented in the weak flesh that languished from hunger and before which the horrors of the forthcoming

crucifixion prefigured. The devil seized this opportunity as the best time to dissuade Christ from his intention, that is the cross, by encountering him in his weariest condition, when he was pining from hunger.

The question which here arises is: *What is the relationship between this temptation of Christ and our own nature?*

The arrow here was leveled at the human self, which Christ bore on our behalf in his flesh, which, at that time, was weary with hunger, struggle, seclusion and prayer, along the way toward the end set before it. Here was an easy offer, which implied some condescension on Satan's part. One could easily exempt oneself at such a moment from all that struggle, bitterness, fasting, isolation, humiliation and deprivation. It was an overpowering allurement at this hard time. The self here was weary, and comfort was easy; quick glory was enticingly available; the need was only for a surrender to the devil, and a truce with sin. How many thousands and millions have fallen here!

But did Christ have a human soul just like ours?

The Bible presents Christ to us as a perfect man. The body he took from the Virgin was a perfect human body with a soul and mind with all their faculties. Hence the saying that Christ the Word became flesh and also man. But this does not mean that he was transformed into flesh or into a man or that he appended another man to his own being. Rather, all that belongs to man belonged, consequently, to Christ the Word; for the human body which he took from the Virgin and united with was a perfect body bearing all the properties of man.

Accordingly he became man, and did not assume a man, as it

seems to Nestorius. And in order that it might be believed that he became man even though he remained what he was, God by nature obviously, therefore it is reported that he was hungry, and was weary from the journey, and endured sleep, and trouble, and pain, and the other human blameless experiences.

And again, in order that he might give assurance to those seeing him that in addition to being man he is also true God, he worked signs of his divinity by rebuking the waves, by raising the dead, and performing other marvelous deeds. (St. Cyril the Great, *First Letter to Succen.*, Cited in: *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 76, The Catholic University of America Press, 1987, p. 195)

This does not mean that Christ became a God and a man who co-existed within him as Son of God and Son of man, as if being two natures or two persons. This is contrary to the faith. But Christ is God and is man and Son of man at one and the same time. He is the Son of God who existed from eternity, who, when he became flesh, also became Son of man. He is the one who said: *Ego Eimi* that is, "I am the Self-Existent," which only God could say. Christ did say, "I am (*Ego Eimi*) the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12), "I am (*Ego Eimi*) the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6). And it was he himself whom we heard saying, "But now you seek to kill me, a *man* who has told you the truth which I hear from God" (Jn. 8:40).

This means that because *Ego Eimi* ("I am the Self-Existent") became flesh, there belonged to Christ one Ego, one self, by which he expressed his divine person and his humanity at one and the same time. Hence, it is clear that Christ put on and accepted within his holy and blessed self our weak and crushed human self, and thus our self became glorious in him and very honorable indeed. But the human self which Christ bore, though it was just like our self in all its weakness, was certainly

elevated to a state much superior to ours, due to its union with the person of the Word; for it was made fit for the eternal glory which surpasses that of angels and all principalities and powers.

“ ‘Father, glorify thy name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice came for your sake, not for mine’ ” (Jn. 12:28-30).

He is God, but he became like us and showed us how to handle the flesh he took from us. However, he also showed us (through the economy of his flesh) that he is much superior to us as man, and to all creation as God... but he humbled himself like a man; for, had he refused to do human works, how could he have endured the humility he went through ? (St. Cyril the Great, *De Recta Fide*)

Therefore, we cannot regard Christ except as one hypostasis, one person, one incarnate self, who performed all the acts of the godhead and manhood together as one and the same work.

We say that our Lord Jesus Christ is one, and the works which belong to his divinity and humanity we consider as one, by reason of the union. (St. Cyril the Great, *De Recta Fide*)

And on account of this, the properties of the flesh are said to be his, since he was in it, such as to hunger, to thirst, to suffer, to weary, and the like, of which the flesh is capable; while on the other hand the works proper to the Word himself, such as to raise the dead, to restore sight to the blind, and to cure the woman with an issue of blood, he did through his own body.¹⁵ And the

¹⁵ This mutuality in acts and properties between the flesh and the Word, is theologically termed as *Communicatio idiomatum*. The first word is Latin, and the second is Greek, denoting mutual relationship.

Word bore the infirmities of the flesh, as his own, for his was the flesh; and the flesh ministered to the works of the godhead, because the godhead was in it, for the body was God's. (St. Athanasius, *Discourse III Against the Arians*; 31. NPNF 2nd series, vol. IV, p. 410)

Hence it is clear that the self which Christ bore on our behalf, when he united with the flesh he took from the Holy Virgin Mary, was actually a human self, perfect and complete in all respects: it was weak in its nature but powerful by its union with the Word.

Therefore, the human self, which Christ bore on our behalf and which Satan encountered in its languor so as to dissuade it from its intention to struggle, trying to diminish the value of its aim, was, in fact, representative of every man's self, and the temptation which Christ's human self encountered was actually our own.

Hence, Christ's firm stance against the last enticement by the devil, with which he tried to shake the human self from its firm belief in the worth of striving, laboring and suffering for the sake of salvation, is counted as victory for every human self seeking its own salvation. It is a final and definitive warrant for the new relationship which Christ formed between God and us by means of devotion and worship in spirit and truth.

... it became necessary for the salvation of us who are upon the earth that the Word of God be made man in order that he might make his own the flesh of man although it was subject to corruption and was sick with the love of pleasure. Since he is life and life-giver, he would destroy the corruption in the flesh and rebuke its inborn motions, plainly those which tend toward love of pleasure. (St. Cyril the Great, *First Letter to Succen.*, Cited in:

The Fathers of the Church, The Catholic University of America Press, 1987, p. 194)

We are all in Christ (whether in temptation or in victory). For the human personality in general has been recreated in him anew; and it is for this reason that he is called the Second Adam; for he managed to communicate to our nature all the bliss and happiness of glory and immortality, just as Adam managed to communicate to it the curse of corruption and humiliation.

For this reason, the slave was emancipated and released from his bondage and elevated to a mystical oneness and union with Christ, when Christ assumed the form of a servant. In like manner have we been elevated by this unique example, on account of our relationship with him in the flesh... and it is evident that he did not choose to be in the state of a servant so as to gain anything for himself, but to give himself to us, and thus make us rich by his own poverty, raise us to his transcendent perfection, and make us sons of God in faith, when we imitate him in all things. (St. Cyril the Great, *On the Gospel of John*, 1:14)

As he tempted the Lord in the desert for forty days, what harm did he inflict on Him by attacking him externally in his body? For interiorly he was God. So also Christians, granted they may be tempted exteriorly, nevertheless, interiorly they are filled with the godhead and suffer no injury. If one has reached this degree, he has arrived at the perfect love of Christ and the fullness of the godhead. But one who is not of this type still wages an interior war. For a certain hour he delights in prayer, but at another time he is bombarded by affliction and is at war. (St. Macarius the Great, *Homily* 26:15)

“It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only you shall serve’ (Mt. 4:10):

Christ, here, made an end of all arguments; for there is no true rest or any valid existence of the human self except in worshipping God, and the ultimate aim of man can never be realized except through this worship.

* * *

X

“**Begone Satan!**” (Mt. 4:10).

HE was tempted as man, and he expelled the devil as God.
(Pope Timothy II of Alexandria, *Letter from Banishment*)

* * *

And now, after Christ has undone the bonds of sin with which our nature was bound, by his fasting, hunger and temptation, there remains for him nothing but to annul sin by his death.

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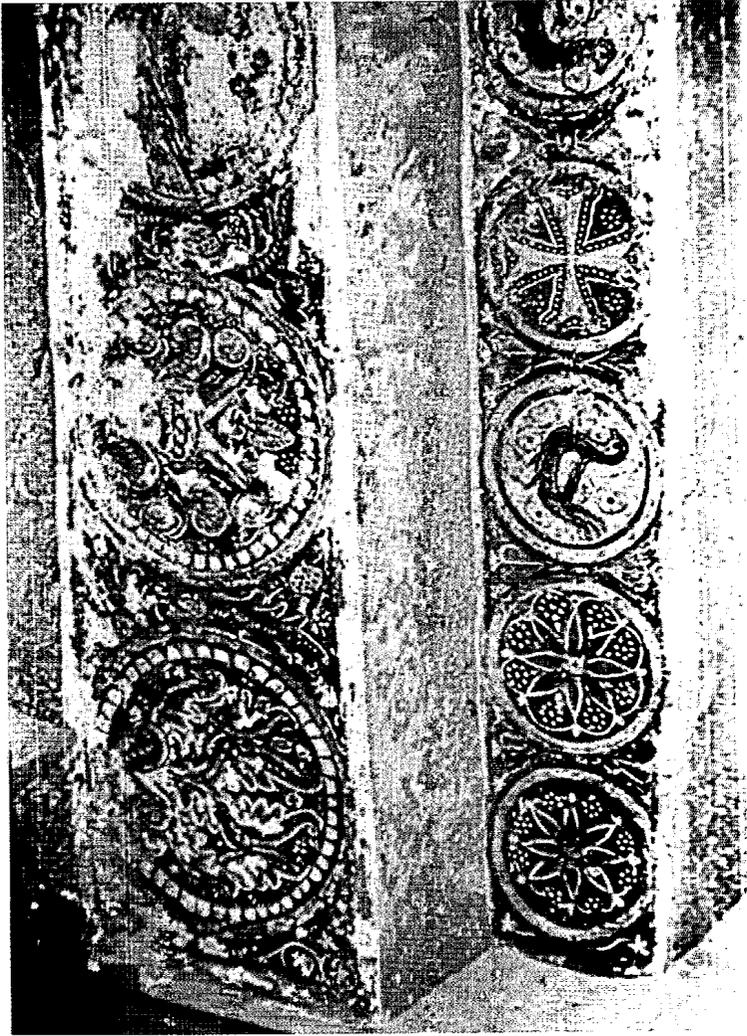
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