

The Ongoing Battle with Temptations

Sin is something we strive to avoid, but sometimes that can be easier said than done. Because before us all the time are temptations to do things we shouldn't do; things that maybe bring momentary pleasure, but ultimately don't bring us closer to God and in some cases push us further away from Him.

Each year at the start of Lent, we reflect on Jesus being tempted by the devil in the desert. The Gospel ends with Jesus being victorious over the devil and making the right choice. He is tempted to turn stones into bread. There's nothing wrong with creating food, but Jesus saying "one does not live on bread alone" shows Jesus overcoming the sins of sensual pleasure. Jesus is also tempted to worship the devil and in exchange will be given control over the kingdoms of the world. In saying "no" to this temptation, which is that of power, Jesus demonstrates how having power over others isn't what matters, for power and authority are God's. And when tempted to throw himself off the Temple so angels will save Him, Jesus overcomes the temptation of the ego. Jesus is at parapet of the Temple in this temptation; the Temple is where God is worshipped. Again, here Jesus shows us how we aren't to be self-absorbed, but are called to serve God.

Most all of us struggle with temptations at one point or another over our lives. "It's a secret, no one will ever know." "Just this once." "What's the big deal?" We justify, we try to forget, we give in, and then we make believe that all's well. Certainly we are forgiven if we are contrite, but we also want to truly try to avoid things that are bad for us. So, what are we to do?

As a starting point, remember that wonderful virtue called temperance. It regulates the appetites. There are many things we might be tempted to do that we can in fact do but just should not do to excess; drinking; eating rich foods; vacation and leisure time; hobbies; etc. Temperance helps us to make sure these things don't get out of control. When we are temperate, we are reminded that we need to also work, serve our family, volunteer, help others, pray, etc. Temperance helps us with temptation by reminding us that we aren't called to be expert golfers or video game players but saints.

Then there there are the things that are always just plain wrong. These are things we should try to eliminate entirely from our lives and what we call sins.

First, when looking at the question "what can I do to make this sin go away," start with mercy. If you feel it is serious enough to go to confession, go. Bring it to God in prayer. Don't hide from it. Be accountable. And it may be something you have a really hard time overcoming, or that crops up again. Don't wallow in shame, but pick yourself back up and reach out for God's mercy - because it is always there for us. God is love, and God loves you and me. Know that the confessor is there to help too and give counsel (though confessions are not time for prolonged spiritual direction). Sometimes a person thinks a sin is major when in fact it may be a venial sin; other times people struggle with

shame, or bringing up past sins even though they have been to confession. It's important to trust in the mercy of our Lord knowing that it will always be there.

With that though we want to try to take steps to "avoid the near occasion of sin" as we say in the Act of Contrition.

Here, after a sin has occurred, look at what caused the temptations to increase. Were you really tired or overworked or stressed out? Maybe you procrastinated on something which led you to cheat. Or the stress caused a sin of the flesh or imprudent use of alcohol. Are people you associate with enabling bad decision making? Sometimes being in certain situations like the kid in the candy store can make combating the situation really difficult.

Another thing to do is to pray. When we pray, we receive strength and grace. God knows what we are going through, so bring it to Him in prayer and ask for His help. And don't forget Mary and the saints too are there to intercede for us.

Also, do you talk to people who you can trust? We talk about sports, the weather, what's on TV, but how about talking about deeper things? We can sometimes have a hard time with that. Don't be afraid to find a confidant, a good friend, or someone you can open up to.

It's also a good idea to have an "action plan" when temptations come. For instance, prayer can help. But you also might busy yourselves with other activities, maybe going for a walk or bike ride, doing some housework, hitting the gym, reading a book, etc when those temptations to commit a particular sin happen. When we busy it can take our mind off a temptation.

You can also look around and see if there are things that cause temptation and make adjustments. Where's the "near occasion" of sin in your life that we pray to avoid in making an Act of Contrition? If it's the computer, you can put it away in another room or if you live with others keep it in a more public space. What's coming in your home on cable? There are certain channels we just should not watch. If you spend too much at the casino, keep a limited amount of cash on hand when you go so you don't overspend. Or if it's alcohol, have a very limited supply on hand. By removing things from the environment, it can really help in the battle.

Also, don't give up! Remember, you will have setbacks; we all do. But remember, God's love is always there for us and He forgives seventy times seven.

Lastly, never get an inflated ego thinking you've overcome a sin forever. Maybe you have, but no alcoholic says "I'm John Doe, and I used to be an alcoholic." All of us are impacted by original sin, and even if we make progress, which we should be happy about, we shouldn't think a sin will never come back; rather we need to keep our guard up, through doing what we've found that works, while at the same time relying constantly on God's help for assistance in the battle.

I hope your Lent is off to a great start. It really is a wonderful time of year because it helps us to grow closer to God and learn how to respond to the love that God gives us. Temptations won't ever go away, and we will fall many times, but with God's grace we can pick ourselves back up and learn how to respond better to the love that He gives us by choosing good and avoiding evil. The Cross reminds us how seriously God takes sin. Let's take it seriously too by looking to what Jesus did for us, and asking for His help to do what He did in overcoming the temptation of the Evil One. It's not an easy battle, but we are not in it alone, and together with God, we too can make the right choices and go from sinners to saints.

God bless,

Fr. Paul