

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

On the First Sunday of Lent we are traditionally invited to reflect on the temptations of Christ, and seek to relate it to our own lives. It's kind of ironic that today is also Valentine's Day, when we offer a token of our affection to the ones we love. Now this becomes a problem if you present your beloved with a delicious looking box of fine, rich chocolates. But, of course, she has already given up eating chocolate for Lent. You are then in the unhappy position of leading her into temptation. What do you do? I don't know! Good luck!

Since it is Valentine's Day, I thought it might be helpful to relate the temptations of Christ to the temptations you married couples face in trying to live out your covenant. It seems that marriage and the family is under assault today like no other human relationship.

First, let's get a handle on this thing we call "temptation". To do that let's start thinking like fishermen. Any fisherman will tell you that if you want to catch fish you have to think like a fish.

To a fish, life is "see a fly, want a fly, eat a fly". A rainbow trout never really reflects on where his life is headed. A girl carp doesn't say to a boy carp, "I don't feel you're as committed to our relationship as I am. I wonder, do you love me for me or just for my body?" Fish are just a collection of appetites. A fish is a stomach, a mouth, and a pair of eyes.

Thinking like a fisherman, you might say something like this, "Hey, Fish, swallow this. It's not the real thing; it's just a lure. You'll think it will feed you, but it won't. It'll trap you. If you were to look closely, Fish, you would see the hook. You'd know once you were hooked that it's just a matter of time before the enemy reels you in."

Wouldn't you think that the fish would wise up and notice the hook or see the line. You'd think fish would look around at all their fish friends who go for a lure and fly off into space and never return. But they don't. Isn't it ironic? We say fish swim together in a school, but they never learn. Aren't you glad we're smarter than fish.

Well...I guess it depends how we deal with temptation whether we are smarter than fish or not. It depends how often we see the lure without noticing the hook, just like the fish.

Immediately after his Baptism in the Jordan, our Gospel tells us that Jesus "was led by the Spirit into the desert...to be tempted by the devil." God had just proclaimed him "his beloved Son with whom He was well pleased" and appeared in the form of a dove, hovering above him. Like Jesus, sometimes it is when we feel closest to God that the tempter seems most determined to lure us away.

Why does God allow temptation in the first place? Is he playing games with us? Testing us? The Bible scholar William Barclay once explained it this way: “What we call temptation is not meant to make us sin; it is meant to enable us to conquer sin. It is not meant to make us bad; it is meant to make us good. It is not meant to weaken us; it is meant to make us emerge stronger and finer and purer from the ordeal. Temptation is not the penalty of being human; temptation is the glory of being human. It is the strengthening exercise which comes to a person whom God wishes to use to manifest His Glory.”

The first temptation Jesus faced was in his hunger. It showed he was as human as all of us. Our temptations more often than not involve our appetites, our hungers. So, it is in marriage. Once the lovin’ is done, the temptation is often to neglect the emotional and spiritual hungers in each other. A wife who feels cherished and appreciated in the small, seemingly insignificant tokens of love by her husband fills his life and their home and family with joy and happiness. Brothers, hear this! Don’t dare to think that a Valentine’s Day gift isn’t a really big thing. If you don’t have it yet, you better not let the sun go down on this day, without getting it. And, if you needed this reminder, it better be something better than a bunch of wilted flowers. Remember, happy wife...happy life.

Likewise, husbands have significant emotional and spiritual needs that only their wives can fill. Husbands crave respect from their wives. They need your approval. They need to hear you praise them for the good they do and bring to you and the family. They need encouragement only you can give. If they’re only hearing complaints and getting “Honey-do” lists from you, you will find yourselves dealing with the grumpiest, surliest, meanest critters not locked up in the zoo.

The next temptation Jesus had to face was one for power and prestige. This is a temptation that enters into almost all marriages. Who controls the money? Who controls the kids? Who controls the remote? But, beyond that, are the temptations to inflate ourselves at the expense of the other. You may find yourself yielding to the temptation to put your spouse down, rather than lifting him or her up. You may be tempted to enlist other family members or friends to prove your point, thereby making your spouse feel ganged-up on or publicly belittled or humiliated.

Resist the temptation to always be right. Resist the temptation to not even try to understand the other’s point of view. In the Nuptial Blessing of the Marriage Ritual husbands are reminded that their wives are their equal and heirs with them to eternal life. Never put the other down. Remember in your marriage vows, you promised to love and honor each other for the rest of your lives. You can resist all the temptations to power and prestige that enter into your marriage by paying close attention to honoring each other.

In practical terms that means wives stop talking about all your husband's faults and foibles with your mothers, sisters, and girl- friends. Share only the good and wonderful things that you love about him. And husbands remember, in putting your wife down with your friends, you are putting yourself down, if St. Paul is right in proclaiming "husbands love your wives as you love your own bodies". Only tell of the blessing she is to you and your children, and the blessing will return to you.

Recently I had to tear into a young man, who I had just met, who referred to the young woman who was pregnant with his child as "my old lady". I told him, "Don't you dare disrespect the mother of your child like that. If she's your old lady, that makes you an old man. And I can see you're not an old man. So, it just makes you a fool."

Finally, Jesus is tempted to throw himself down, off the parapet of the Temple to show that he is who he says he is. The temptation is really to take a short-cut. Don't go through the suffering and dying on the Cross. Take the easy path. Go for the glory! Forget the cross!

I see this temptation enter into a marriage where wives gradually give up being wives and become mothers. They lose themselves in the lives of their children and give up the often hard and frustrating work of being loving wives to husbands who need their attention and affection too.

Husbands face similar temptations. Many feel they've done all they need to do in "bringing home the bacon"; feel entitled to relax when they come home, and resent any intrusion on their "down time" from their wives and children. When resentment to this attitude develops in their wives, all too often and all too easily in this day and age, they give in to the temptations offered by pornography (which results in virtual adultery) or endless gaming on the internet. It's all the glory and none of the Cross of working at and building loving relationships with their wives and children.

And please, please, please Parents, do not inflict your disagreements and problems on your children. They deserve better. They can only grow in confidence and goodness in an environment where their parents share mutual love and respect. Your children will honor you and make you proud and want to please you when they see you loving and honoring one another.

Jesus showed us in his fully human nature that all these temptations that he faced and we have to face in our lives can be overcome by holding fast to God, and for you married couples, holding fast to each other.

I have lived among you long enough to have married some of you, baptized your babies, gave First Communion to your children and prepared them for their Confirmation, and am now marrying them, and baptizing your grandchildren. I have seen in so many of you that which is most beautiful in our human experience—young people marrying, raising families, having children, and growing even deeper in love as you grow older together. You have shown over and over it can be done. All the temptations through which you have had to struggle have made you better, stronger, finer, and purer, and God is using you to reveal His Glory. Thank You and Happy Valentine’s Day!