

QUESTION 41

The Temptation of Christ

Next we have to consider the temptation of Christ. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Was it fitting for Christ to be tempted? (2) What about the place of temptation? (3) What about the time? (4) What about the mode and the order of the temptations?

Article 1

Was it fitting for Christ to be tempted?

It seems that it was not fitting for Christ to be tempted (*Christo tentari non conveniebat*):

Objection 1: To tempt or test (*tentare*) is to undertake an experiment, which is done only with respect to something unknown. But Christ's power was known even to the demons; for Luke 4:41 says, "He did not allow the demons to speak, because they knew that He was the Christ." Therefore, it seems that it was not fitting for Christ to be tempted.

Objection 2: Christ came in order to destroy the works of the devil—this according to 1 John 3:8 ("To this end the Son of God appeared, that He might destroy the works of the devil"). But it does not belong to the same individual both to destroy the works of someone and to allow those works. And so it seems to have been inappropriate for Christ to allow Himself to be tempted by the devil.

Objection 3: There are three sorts of temptation: from the flesh, from the world, and from the devil. But Christ was not tempted by either the flesh or the world. Therefore, He should not have been tempted by the devil, either.

But contrary to this: Matthew 4:1 says, "Jesus was led into the desert in order to be tempted by the devil."

I respond: Christ wanted to be tempted, first of all, in order to give us help in bearing up against temptations. Hence, in a homily Gregory says, "It was not unworthy of our redeemer, who came also to be slain, to want to be tempted, in order that He might conquer our temptations by means of His own temptations, just as He overcame our death by means of His own death."

Second, in order to caution us ahead of time (*propter nostram cautelam*), so that no one, no matter how holy, might think himself secure and immune from temptation. Hence, He, too, wanted to be tempted after His baptism, because, as Hilary puts it in *Super Matthaëum*, "The temptations of the devil (*diaboli tentamenta*) assail especially those who have been sanctified, since victory over holy individuals has to be what he desires the most." Hence, Ecclesiasticus 2:1 likewise says, "Son, when you enter God's service, remain firm in righteousness and fear, and prepare your soul for temptation."

Third, for the sake of giving an example—more specifically, in order to instruct us in how we might overcome the temptations of the devil. Hence, in *De Trinitate* 4 Augustine says that Christ "gave Himself over to be tempted by the devil in order that He might be our mediator in overcoming the devil's temptations, not only through His assistance but also through His example."

Fourth, in order to impart to us confidence in His mercy. Hence, Hebrews 4:15 says, "We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who was tempted as we are in all things, without sin."

Reply to objection 1: In *De Civitate Dei* 9 Augustine says, "Christ became known to the demons only to the extent that He wanted to be known—not through His being the Life Eternal, but through certain temporal effects of His power," from which they formed a sort of conjecture that Christ was the Son of God. And this is why [the devil] wanted to tempt Him.

And this is signified in Matthew 4:2-3, where it says that "after He became hungry, the tempter

approached Him.” For, as Hilary puts it, “The devil would not have dared to tempt Christ except because of the weakness associated with His hunger, which he recognized as something human. And this is also clear from his very manner of tempting, when he said, “If you are the Son of God ...” Gregory explains this by saying, “What does such an opening line mean except that he knew that the Son of God was going to come, and yet, because of the weakness of [Jesus’s] body, he did not think that the Son of God had indeed come?”

Reply to objection 2: Christ came to destroy the works of the devil not by acting with power, but instead by suffering at the devil’s hands and the hands of his members, in order that He might thus conquer the devil by righteousness and not by power (*ut sic diabolum vinceret iustitia, not potestate*). As Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 13, “The devil had to be overcome not by God’s power, but by righteousness.” And so as far as the temptation of Christ is concerned, one has to consider (a) what He did by His own will and (b) what He suffered at the hands of the devil.

For it was by His own will that He offered Himself to the tempter. Hence, Matthew 4:1 says, “Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit in order to be tempted by the devil.” Gregory says that this should be understood to mean the Holy Spirit, so that “His own Spirit led Him to a place where the malignant spirit would find Him in order to tempt Him.”

On the other hand, He suffered at the hands of the devil “by being taken to the pinnacle of the temple” or, again, “to a very high mountain.” Gregory explains, “It is no wonder that He allowed Himself to be led to the mountain, given that He allowed Himself to be hung on the cross by His limbs.” However, it is understood that He was taken by the devil [to the mountain] not by force, but because, as Origen puts it in *Super Lucam*, “He followed him into the temptation like a wrestler advancing of his own accord.”

Reply to objection 3: As the Apostle says [in Hebrews 4:15], “Christ wanted to be tested in all things, without sin.” But temptation that comes from the enemy can exist without sin, since it comes from an exterior suggestion alone. By contrast, a temptation that is from the flesh cannot exist without sin, since this sort of temptation comes through pleasure and excessive sentient desire (*per delectationem et concupiscentiam*)—and, as Augustine puts it, “Some sin occurs when the flesh has desires contrary to the spirit.” And that is why Christ wanted to be tempted by the enemy and not by the flesh.

Article 2

Was it fitting for Christ to be tempted in the desert?

It seems that it was not fitting for Christ to be tempted in the desert (*Christus non debuit tentari in deserto*):

Objection 1: As has been explained (a. 1), Christ wanted to be tempted as an example for us. But an example should be openly presented to those who are to be formed by the example. Therefore, He should not have been tempted in the desert.

Objection 2: In *Super Matthaem* Chrysostom says, “The devil most especially moves in to tempt when he sees individuals who are alone. Hence, in the beginning he tempted the woman when he found her without the man.” And so it seems that by going into the desert to be tempted, Christ exposed Himself to temptation. Therefore, since His temptation is an example for us, it seems that others should likewise put themselves in a position to undergo temptations. But this seems to be dangerous, since we should instead avoid occasions of temptation.

Objection 3: In Matthew 4:5, Christ’s second temptation is said to be the one in which the devil

took Him to the holy city and placed Him on the pinnacle of the temple—which was not located in the desert. Therefore, it is not the case that He was tempted only in the desert.

But contrary to this: Mark 1:13 says, “Jesus was in the desert for forty days and forty nights, and He was tempted by Satan.”

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), it was by His own will that Christ exposed Himself to the devil to be tempted, just as it was likewise by His own will that He exposed Himself in His members to be killed; otherwise, the devil would not have dared to approach Him.

Now the devil pays more attention to an individual when that individual is by himself, since, as Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, “Even if someone might prevail against one, two resist him.” And so it is that Christ went out into the desert, as if into a field of battle, in order to be tempted there by the devil. Hence, in *Super Lucam* Ambrose says, “Christ went into the desert intentionally, in order to provoke the devil. For if that one”—i.e., the devil—“had not fought,” then this one”—i.e., Christ—“would not have been victorious.” And he adds other arguments as well, claiming that Christ did this (a) “*mystically* (*mysterio*), in order to liberate Adam from exile,” given that Adam had been driven out of paradise into the desert, and (b) “*as an example* (*exemplo*), in order to show us that the devil looks askance at those who tend toward the better things.”

Reply to objection 1: Christ is presented to everyone as an example through faith—this according to Hebrews 12:2 (“Looking upon Jesus, the author and consummator of faith”). But as Romans 10:17 explains, faith comes “from hearing” and not from sight. What’s more, John 20:29 says, “Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed.” And so in order for Christ’s temptation to be an example for us, it was not necessary for the temptation to be seen by men, but it was instead sufficient for men to be told about it.

Reply to objection 2: There are two sorts of occasion of temptation:

One comes *from the man*, viz., when an individual puts himself close to a sin by not avoiding occasions of sin. And this sort of occasion of temptation is to be avoided, in the way that, in Genesis 19:27, Lot is told, “Do not stop anywhere in the region surrounding Sodom.”

The second sort of occasion of temptation comes *from the devil*, who, as Ambrose says, always “looks askance at those who tend toward the better things.” And this sort of occasion of sin is not to be avoided. Hence, in *Super Matthaem* Chrysostom says, “It was not only Christ who was led into the desert by the Spirit, but all God’s children who have the Holy Spirit. For they are not content to sit idly by, but instead the Holy Spirit is urging them on to undertake some great work—which is for them to be in the desert as far as the devil is concerned. For in the desert there is no unrighteousness for the devil to delight in. Again, as far as the flesh and the world are concerned, every good work is a desert, since it is not in accord with what the flesh and the world want.” However, it is not dangerous to give the devil this sort of occasion for tempting, since the assistance of the Holy Spirit, who is the author of the perfect work, is greater than the attack of the devil who looks askance.

Reply to objection 3: There are those who claim that all the temptations took place in the desert. Some of them say that Christ was led to the holy city not in reality but in a vision in His imagination, whereas others say that even the holy city itself, i.e., Jerusalem, is called the desert, because it had been deserted by God.

But this was unnecessary. For Mark says that He was tempted in the desert by the devil, but he does not say that He was tempted *only* in the desert.

Article 3

Was it fitting for the temptation of Christ to take place after a fast?

It seems that it was not fitting for the temptation of Christ to take place after a fast (*tentatio Christi non debuit esse post ieiunium*):

Objection 1: It was asserted above (q. 40, a. 2) that an austere way of life was not fitting for Christ. But it seems to savor of extreme austerity for Him to have eaten nothing for forty days and forty nights—for this is the way in which He is understood “to have fasted for forty days and forty nights” (Matthew 4:2), viz., because “on those days He did not eat anything at all,” as Gregory explains. Therefore, it does not seem to have been fitting to put a fast of this sort before the temptation.

Objection 2: Mark 1:13 says, “He was in the desert for forty days and forty nights, and was tempted by the devil.” But He fasted for forty days and forty nights. Therefore, it seems that He was tempted by the devil while He was still fasting and not after the fast.

Objection 3: We do not read that Christ fasted except for this one time. But He was not tempted just one time by the devil; for Luke 4:13 says, “When he had finished with every temptation, the devil withdrew from Him for a while (*usque ad tempus*).” Therefore, just as a fast did not precede the second temptation, so neither should a fast have preceded the first temptation.

But contrary to this: Matthew 4:2-3 says, “After He had fasted for forty days and forty nights, He was hungry, and it was then that the tempter approached Him.”

I respond: It was fitting for Christ to want to be tempted after a fast:

First of all, for the sake of giving an example. For as has been explained (a. 1), since it is incumbent on everyone to guard himself against temptations, by the fact that Christ fasted before His upcoming temptation He taught us that we have to arm ourselves against temptations by fasting. Hence, in 2 Corinthians 6:5-7 the Apostle counts fasts among the weapons of righteousness.

Second, in order to show that the devil steps forward to tempt those who fast, along with others who devote themselves to good works. And so just as Christ is tempted after His baptism, so too after His fast. Hence, in *Super Matthaëum* Chrysostom says, “In order that you might learn how great a good fasting is, and how it serves as a shield against the devil, and that after baptism you have to give yourself up to fasting and not to wantonness, Christ fasted—not as one who needed to fast, but as one who was instructing us.”

Third, because what followed upon fasting was hunger, which gave the devil the audacity to approach Him. Now as Hilary explains in *Super Matthaëum*, “When our Lord became hungry, it was not because of an unplanned lack of food (*ex subreptione inediae*); instead, He abandoned His manhood to its nature (*naturae suae hominem dereliquit*). For the devil was to be conquered not by God, but by flesh.” Hence, as Chrysostom likewise says, “He did not go any further than Moses and Elijah in His fasting in order that the fact that He had assumed our flesh would not seem unbelievable.”

Reply to objection 1: The reason why it was not fitting for Christ to live an austere life was in order that He might show Himself to be like those to whom He was preaching. However, no one can take on the role of preaching without first being purged and perfected in virtue—just as Acts 1:1 likewise says of Christ that “He began to do and to teach.” And so Christ took on an austere life immediately after His baptism in order to teach others that they are to transition to the role of preaching after their flesh has been tamed—this according to the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 9:27 (“I chastise my body and bring it into subjection, lest perhaps after preaching to others, I should myself be rejected”).

Reply to objection 2: This passage from Mark can be understood in such a way that He was in the desert for forty days and forty nights, during which time He fasted, whereas what he says next, “and He

was tempted by Satan,” should be understood to apply not *during* the forty days and forty nights, but *after* them. For Matthew 4:2 says, “When He had fasted for forty days and forty nights, He was afterwards hungry,” whereupon the tempter seized the occasion to approach Him. Hence, again, what is added, “... and the angels ministered to Him,” should be understood consecutively, as is shown by the fact that Matthew 4:11 says, “Then the devil left Him”—i.e., after the temptation—“and, behold, the angels came and ministered to Him.” Now what Mark 1:13 interposes, “... and He was with the beasts,” is included, according to Chrysostom, in order show “what sort of place the desert was,” since, namely, it was impassable to men and full of beasts.

However, according to Bede’s exposition [of Mark 1:12-13], our Lord is tempted for forty days and forty nights. But by this he means not the visible temptations which Matthew and Luke are talking about and which occurred after the fast, but certain other attacks that Christ may have suffered at the hands of the devil during the time of His fast.

Reply to objection 3: As Ambrose explains in *Super Lucam*, the devil withdrew from Christ “for a while” not in the sense that he was going to *tempt* Him later, but in the sense that he was going to *attack* Him openly, viz., at the time of His passion. And yet in that attack he did seem to tempt Christ toward disappointment with, and hatred of, His neighbors, just as in the desert he had tempted Him toward the pleasure of gluttony and the contempt of God through idolatry.

Article 4

Was the mode and order of the temptation appropriate?

It seems that the manner and order of the temptation was not appropriate (*non fuerit conveniens tentationis modus et ordo*):

Objection 1: The devil’s temptation induces one toward sin. But if Christ had relieved His bodily hunger by turning the stones into loaves of bread, He would not have sinned, just as He did not sin when He multiplied the loaves—which was no less a miracle—in order to come to the aid of the hungry crowd. Therefore, it seems that this was not a temptation at all (*nulla fuerit illa temptatio*).

Objection 2: It is not appropriate for an influencer to urge something contrary to what he intends (*nullus persuasor convenienter persuadet contrarium eius quod intendit*). But when the devil placed Christ on the pinnacle of the temple, he intended to tempt Him toward pride or vainglory. Therefore, it was inappropriate for him to urge Christ to throw Himself down—something contrary to pride or vainglory, which always seeks to ascend.

Objection 3: A single temptation has to do with a single sin. But in the temptation that occurred on the mountain, [the devil] was encouraging two sins, viz., covetousness (*cupiditas*) and idolatry (*idololatria*). Therefore, the mode of the temptation does not seem to have been appropriate.

Objection 4: Temptations are ordered toward sins. But as was established in the Second Part (*ST* 1-2, q. 84, a. 4), there are seven capital sins, whereas the devil tempted Christ only with respect to three of them, viz., gluttony, vainglory, and covetousness. Therefore, the temptation does not seem sufficient.

Objection 5: After victory over all the vices, the temptation to pride and vainglory remains for a man, since, as Augustine says, “Pride lies in wait for good works, that they might perish.” Therefore, it is inappropriate for Matthew to posit the temptation on the mountain to covetousness as the last temptation and the temptation to vainglory as the middle temptation—especially given that Luke orders these temptations in the opposite way.

Objection 6: In *Super Matthaem* Jerome says, “Christ’s intention was to conquer the devil by His humility and not by His power.” Therefore, He should not have repelled the devil with the imperious rebuke, “Begone, Satan!”

Objection 7: The Gospel narrative seems to contain something false. For it does not seem possible for Christ to be placed on the pinnacle of the temple without His being seen by others. Nor is there any mountain so tall that the whole world can be seen from it, so that Christ could have been shown all the kingdoms of the world from it. Therefore, it seems that the temptation of Christ has not been appropriately described.

But contrary to this is the authority of Scripture.

I respond: As Gregory explains, a temptation that comes from an enemy comes in the mode or manner of a suggestion (*per modum suggestionis*). However, it is not the case that things can be suggested to everyone in the same manner; instead, what is suggested to each individual comes from among the things he has an affective inclination toward. And so the devil does not immediately tempt a spiritual man toward serious sins, but instead begins little by little with less serious sins in order to lead him later to more serious sins. Hence, in *Moralia* 31, commenting on Job 39:25 (“He smells the battle from afar: the leaders exhorting and the army howling”), Gregory says, “The leaders are well described as exhorting and the army as howling. For the initial vices insinuate themselves into the deceived mind under some pretext, as it were, but the innumerable vices that follow drag the mind into a complete frenzy and confound it with something like a bestial clamor.”

And this is the same order that the devil observed in tempting the first man. For in the beginning he agitated the first man’s mind about eating from the forbidden tree by saying, “Why is it that God commanded you not to eat of every tree in paradise?” (Genesis 3:1). Then he [tempted him] toward vainglory, when he said, “Your eyes will be opened.” Third, he finished with the temptation to extreme pride by saying, “You will be like gods, knowing good and evil.”

And he preserved the same order of tempting in the case of Christ. For he first tempted Him with respect to something that men desire, no matter how spiritual they might be, viz., sustaining their bodily nature with food. Second, he proceeded to something with respect to which spiritual men sometimes fall short, viz., doing things for show (*ut scilicet aliqua ad ostentationem operenter*), and this pertains to vainglory. Third, he finished the temptation with something that is now for carnal men and not spiritual men, viz., to desire the riches and glory of the world to the point of hating God. And that is why in the first two temptations he said, “If you are the Son of God ...”—but not in the third, which, unlike the first two, cannot appeal to spiritual men who are sons of God by adoption.

Now Christ resisted these temptations with citations from the Law and not with the strength of His power, “in order that,” as Pope Leo puts it, “in this very way He might both honor man more and punish the adversary more, given that the enemy of the human race was being vanquished not, as it were, by God, but, as it were, by a man.”

Reply to objection 1: Making use of what is necessary for one’s sustenance is not a sin of gluttony, whereas a man’s doing something disordered out of a desire for this sustenance can belong to the vice of gluttony. But in a case in which recourse can be had to human means, it is disordered for an individual to want to seek food for himself miraculously just for the sake of sustaining his body. Hence, the Lord miraculously bestowed manna on the children of Israel in the desert, when food could not otherwise be had. And, similarly, He fed the crowds in a deserted place when food could not otherwise be had. But in order to satisfy His hunger, Christ could have provided for Himself otherwise than by working miracles—in the way that John the Baptist did (Matthew 3:4) or, again, by going in haste to nearby places. And so the devil thought that if Christ were merely human, He would sin if He tried to work a miracle in order to relieve His hunger.

Reply to objection 2: It is frequently the case that by means of an exterior humiliation an individual is seeking the sort of glory by which he might be exalted with respect to spiritual goods. Hence, in *De Sermone Domini in Monte* Augustine says, “Notice that there can be boasting not only with respect to the beauty and splendor of material things, but even with respect to sordid squalor.” And to signify this, the devil urges Jesus to throw himself down in order to seek spiritual glory.

Reply to objection 3: It is a sin to desire the riches and honors of the world when they are desired in a disordered way. This is principally manifested by a man’s doing something unrighteous for the sake of acquiring such things. And so the devil was not content to urge Christ toward a disordered desire for riches and honors (*cupiditas divitiarum et honorum*), but tried to get Him to *worship him* in order to acquire things of this sort—which is the most heinous of crimes and contrary to God. And not only does he say, “If you worship me ...,” but he amplifies, “If you fall down and worship me ...” (Matthew 4:9). For, as Ambrose explains, “Ambition harbors a domestic danger, viz., that in order to dominate others, it first serves them, and it bows in submission in order to be granted honor; and the higher it wants to go, the more menial it becomes.”

And, again, similarly to the case of the preceding temptations, from a desire for one sin he tried to lead Him into another sin—just as from the desire for food he had tried to lead Him toward the vanity of performing miracles for no reason, and from an excessive desire for glory he had tried to lead Him toward tempting God by throwing Himself down [from the pinnacle of the temple].

Reply to objection 4: As Ambrose says in *Super Lucam*, “Scripture would not have said, ‘When every temptation had been completed, the devil departed from Him’, unless the matter of all sins had existed in the three temptations already related. For the causes of temptations are the causes of excessive desires (*causae temptationum causae sunt cupiditates*), viz., namely, sentient delight (*oblectatio carnis*), the prospect of glory, and a longing for power.”

Reply to objection 5: As Augustine says in *De Consensu Evangeliorum*, “It is uncertain what happened first, whether the kingdoms of the earth were first shown to Him and afterwards He was taken to the pinnacle of the Temple, or whether the latter came first and the former afterwards. But it does not matter, as long as everything that happened has been made clear.” The evangelists seem to have settled upon different orderings because sometimes covetousness arises from vainglory, and sometimes vice versa.

Reply to objection 6: After Christ had suffered the affront of being tempted by the devil’s saying, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down,” He was not disturbed, and neither did He rebuke the him. By contrast, when the devil usurped God’s honor by saying, “All this I will give you if you fall down and worship me,” Christ was irritated and repelled him by saying “Begone, Satan!” in order that we might learn from His example to endure affronts against ourselves with magnanimity (*nostras quidam iniurias magnanimiter sustinere*), but not to tolerate even listening to affronts against God (*Dei autem iniurias nec usque ad auditum sufferre*).

Reply to objection 7: As Chrysostom remarks, “The devil took Christ to the pinnacle of the temple in such a way that He would be seen by everyone, but He himself, without the devil’s knowledge, acted in such a way that He would not be seen by anyone.”

And when it is said that “‘He showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory’, this should be understood to mean not that He saw the kingdoms themselves or their cities or their people, or their gold and silver, but instead that the devil pointed with his finger to the regions in which each kingdom or city was located and explained in words the honors and status of each kingdom.”

Alternatively, according to Origen, “The devil showed Him how he himself ruled in the world through different vices.”