

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent Year “A”

February 29-March 1, 2020

Readings: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

As a young priest, I loved to follow college basketball. My favorite team hailed from Duke University. But I was conflicted...not because of how they played the game, but because of their nickname– the Blue Devils! Arizona State Sun Devils, DePaul Blue Demons, Tampa Bay Devil Rays (granted, it’s a fish), even the Wake Forest Demon Deacons. True, we also have the Anaheim Angels, New Orleans Saints and San Diego Padres!<sup>1</sup>

Now, the vast majority of people do not view such nicknames as a ringing endorsement of evil; but perhaps it reveals something about how seriously we take the reality of evil. Devils are innocuous carton figures, team mascots. They stand for craftiness, tenaciousness.

A good starting point is the reality of evil. Do we see it in the world? The answer to this is painfully obvious—we see frequently, at times even coming from ourselves. From where does evil originate? Ultimately, it comes from our own free choices. God cannot create someone evil in himself, yet he gave us the gift of free will. How we use that gift affects our relationship with God now and for eternity.

Sin entered the world through our first parents—this is the constant witness of Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. Because we are irrevocably linked with humanity by means of our shared human nature, we too were affected by this first choice. Our *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches:

Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy. [Cf. Gen 3:1-5; Wis 2:24] Scripture and the Church's Tradition see in this being a fallen angel, called "Satan" or the "devil". [Cf. Jn 8:44; Rev 12:9] The Church teaches that Satan was at first a good angel, made by God: "The

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<sup>1</sup> Until 2002, the high school team in Devil's Lake North Dakota was nicknamed the Satans. Only after 80 years did the school board decide to change the name. Henceforth, the team would be known as the Firebirds.

devil and the other demons were indeed created naturally good by God, but they became evil by their own doing."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the team nicknames have it partially right. The devil is crafty, cagey and persistent—all the qualities one might think would be of benefit in a sporting contest. But our spiritual health is a matter of our ultimate happiness and our future with or without our loving Father.

The existence of the devil appears hundreds of times in the Scriptures, and repeatedly throughout the Church's Tradition. The Church does not desire to scare them into belief, but rather to share the saving message of Christ. God sent his only Son to save us from our bondage to evil. The trouble is, we want to localize it, and it is not that simple. It is no accident that St. Augustine was bothered by this for years before his conversion: "I sought the source of evil, and I found no explanation."<sup>3</sup>

As powerful as the temptation towards evil can be, we must not despair. The devil, powerful in that he is pure spirit, is still a creature. He cannot prevent the building up of God's reign. In a November 15, 1972 to a General Audience Address, Pope Paul VI frankly admitted that evil is the "greatest single obstacle"<sup>4</sup> to understand our universe.

This is not about seeing demonic possession at every turn. It is enough to see his existence in the denial of evil and sin in our society. Wherever love is obscured, where Christ's teaching is reviled or conveniently removed from public discourse, the craftiness of evil is being manifest.

Today's Gospel demonstrates that Jesus underwent all that we experience as pilgrims on the way. He was not immune to the temptations that can keep us in bondage to sin. He understands our struggles and his valiant witness gives us strength and resolve to continue for another day.

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<sup>2</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 391. This paragraph quotes [Lateran Council IV (1215): DS 800]

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Confessions VII, 5, 7, 11 etc.*

<sup>4</sup> "When the problem of evil is seen in all its complexity and in its absurdity from the point of view of our limited minds, it becomes an obsession. It poses the greatest single obstacle to our religious understanding of the universe."

To be disciples of Jesus, we first admit those ways in which we too can fall prey to evil and attack those tendencies especially during Lent. Our **patience** with the faults of others becomes a conduit of Christ's love.

As **people of hope**, we help to stem the tide that some may feel towards despair, when on the surface, they are overwhelmed. As **witnesses of faith**, we tirelessly proclaim the ultimate triumph of good over evil and pray that we will be faithful signs of a love that is more powerful than temptation, more lasting than immediate gratification, and ultimately more joyous than could be possibly imagined.