
GANZ – FIRST MEDITATION FOR LENT 2025



The Temptation of Christ (1500-1504)¹ by Juan de Flandes (c 1465 – c 21 October 1519)², from a series painted for Queen Isabella I of Castile and Aragon, in the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

Jules Toner, SJ, *A Commentary on St. Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (1982), page 30: "Any vision of human life which does not see it as a life of conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and flesh, Christ and Satan, has lost the Scriptural vision within which Ignatius [of Loyola] is speaking. It is above all in the conflict of Christ and Satan, not as personifications of forces, but as persons struggling over the everlasting destiny of persons – it is in this conflict that Ignatius sees Holy Scripture reaching *its profoundest revelation of what is going on underneath* all the turmoil and peace, the misery and exultation, of human history in peoples and in every individual life." [Emphasis added.]

Scripture – Luke 4:1-13: the Tempting of the Christ

¹ Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, ² for forty days being put to the test by the devil. During that time, he ate nothing and at the end he was hungry.³

The Gospel chosen in the Catholic liturgical calendar for the first Sunday of Lent this year is this one from Luke, quoting here its opening lines. We should remember that "to tempt" has two meanings.

First, we know that it means "To try to attract, to entice (a person) to do evil; to present attractions to the passions or frailties of; to allure or incite to evil with the prospect of some pleasure or advantage."⁴ (Notice in this definition there is no mention of the

¹ To study the painting, see:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Juan_de_Flandes,_The_Temptation_of_Christ,_c._1500-1504,_NGA_50726.jpg

² This painting (above) is one of forty-seven small panels commissioned by Queen Isabella I of Castille and of Aragon (born in Castile 22 April 1451; died 26 November 1504).² And by Elisa Bermejo²: "Juan de Flandes's early style is clearly defined in these works, suggesting that by the time he arrived in Spain he was already thoroughly trained in a South Netherlandish idiom. Contact with the court at Castile had a deep impact on his art, though it remained clearly related to the Ghent school, especially the work of the illuminator known as the Master of Mary of Burgundy. Juan may also have spent some time in Bruges, for the calm, meditative elegance of Hans Memling is detectable in his paintings, as is the influence of early miniatures by Gerard David. ... The panels also reveal Juan de Flandes's excellent sense of line and colour."

³ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 4:1-2.

⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "to tempt".

person or persons, or organizations, who are directly responsible for doing the tempting – this is a failure of definition.⁵) This is the meaning that typically we focus on. But when we do so, we overlook the other meaning that, I suggest, places the focus where it should be.

Second (a meaning active from 1382-1700), it means “to try, to make trial of, to put to the test or proof; to try the quality, worth, or truth of.”⁶ Paying attention to this meaning opens a way for us to understand why the Holy Spirit “led” Jesus into the desert “to be tested.” As the great spiritual writer and Cistercian André Louf (1929-2010) reminds: “There is no faith that is not tested, just as there is no tree that does not need to be pruned in order to produce more fruit (John 15:2).”⁷ As “interesting” as it may be to pay attention to Satan and what he is doing with Jesus in the desert, it is far more important to notice what the skillful Holy Spirit is doing, bringing an extraordinary person, Jesus, the God-Man, into greater maturity, right on time, and for the sake of His ability to bear “more fruit”. As Sister Ruth Burrows, OCD wrote: “God Himself can strike a man as lightning strikes, not for his destruction but to create him anew.”

For any of us to mature in our spiritual lives, when God judges us ready, we must be taught by the Holy Spirit what really is at stake in this world, and who the Satan is and how the Deceiver operates (St. Ignatius of Loyola calls him, the “enemy of our human nature”), working inside people willing to cooperate with him, who “*prefer* darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19). The point is for us to recognize how Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, quickly perceives the “heart” of the Deceiver and his malice and stops him cold.

The Painting - Observations and Insights -

Notice how all three of the temptations are referenced in this painting. The first one (appearing up close and in the center) is obviously about turning stones into bread (Luke 4:3-4) – the “enemy of our human nature” standing and offering a hand-picked stone; Jesus sitting, about whom the text tells us – “During that time he ate nothing and at the end he was hungry.”. The second one we see happening up there to the left, on the top of the cliff (4:5-8). The third one (4:9-12) is happening over there to the right, on

⁵ My point here is that “temptations” don’t just sit out there to allure or seduce us. They are deliberately placed out there by persons intent on tempting people. An essential part of the definition of “to tempt” must include the agency of free persons in their effort to ensnare people. Think how deeply the “commodifying” of so much in American culture causes our primary relation to businesses, to churches, to political institutions to be “the one who is to be tempted” to do what they want us to do. What we have lost is *the art of persuading*, which is an art that appeals to the reason and good judgment of free people; temptations try to get around, to avoid engaging, a person’s reason and good judgment.

⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to tempt**”.

⁷ André Louf, *Tuning into Grace: The Quest for God* (Dutch, 1984; English 1992), p. 38.

the parapet⁸ of the Temple in Jerusalem. Having all three in the same frame suggests that every temptation, finally, is about the same thing, even though they each appear to be about different things.

The appearing of the Satan, the Deceiver, as a Franciscan friar is a shocking dig at the hypocrisy which may characterize any “professional” religious – a Priest or Friar, or Sister, or Brother. Only a discerning eye, we guess, could perceive those horns and those disturbing webbed feet. (The Holy Spirit helps us see what we need to see.) We may recall instances in our own lives when we were gulled⁹ by supposedly dedicated professionals of the spiritual life. We may, then, find ourselves enjoying this painter’s sarcastic (possibly cynical) portrayal of the Franciscan here – “He is *not* what he seems”. However, I think it likely that there is a deeper insight being invited. Recall the famous text from the Book of *Sirach* or *Ecclesiasticus*, Chapter 6:

⁷ If you want to make a friend, take him on trial,
and do not be in a hurry to trust him;

⁸ for one kind of friend is so only when it suits him
but will not stand by you in your day of trouble. ¹⁰

Somewhere in the ancient Tradition (I cannot recall where I came across it) it suggested that the person who came to Jesus in the Wilderness to tempt Him appeared, not as a scary, frightening demon but as a friend, as someone Jesus knew. The Deceiver *appeared* inside the morally compromised personality of that friend and struck at Jesus. Jesus’ mastery is that He discerned the falseness *in* this friend, a “holy man” (in the painting) whom perhaps Jesus had been inclined to trust. (Remember how the Deceiver, in one instance, operated inside the personality of one of Jesus’ three closest and most trusted friends – St. Peter!

Matthew 16 (NJB): ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God thinks but as human beings do.’¹¹

⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**parapet**” - **2.a. - 1598** - A low wall or barrier, often ornamental, placed at the edge of a platform, balcony, roof, etc., or along the sides of a bridge, pier, quay, etc., to prevent people from falling.

⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to gull**” - **1. - a1550** - *transitive*. To make a gull of; to dupe, cheat, befool, ‘take in’, deceive. Also, *absol.*, to practise cheating.

¹⁰ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Sir 6:7–8.

¹¹ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 16:23.

We might consider following Jesus' example. Jesus' rejection of each temptation was perhaps less important than was His focus on discerning *the kind of person it was* who had come out into the Wilderness to find Him, to tempt Him, coming with a smiling face, filled with concern, and apparently offering to help Him with his career choices. Jesus perceived that this friend was false. (Have you ever noticed how one consonant away from "friend"¹² is "fiend"?) Jesus rejected the Deceiver, not the friend, and indirectly the temptation, three times, as is enjoined upon¹³ us to do in the Catholic ritual of Baptism:

Do you reject sin, so as to live in the freedom of God's children? I do.

Do you reject the glamor¹⁴ of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin? I do.

Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness? I do.

False friends are far more dangerous to us than are the temptations to do disordered things.

Luke 17 (NJB): ¹ He said to his disciples, 'Causes of falling are sure to come, but alas for the one through whom they occur! ² It would be better for such a person to be thrown into the sea with a millstone round the neck than to be the downfall of a single one of these little ones. ³ Keep watch on yourselves! ¹⁵

One last observation. I am not sure about this, but it appears to me that the Deceiver cannot bear to peer into Jesus's face and eyes. He seems to me to be looking off to the left side of Jesus. The duplicitous person, when fearing exposure, will not (perhaps cannot) give his or her eyes to the other whom he or she is seeking to dupe. And it further appears to me that Jesus is not looking into the face and eyes of the Deceiver, nor does He seem interested in the stone that is being offered Him. Rather, Jesus' eyes appear to me to be looking directly at the chest, into the heart, of the Deceiver.

¹² The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**fiend**" - **1. - Old English-1340** - † An enemy; foe. *Obsolete.* - **2.a. - Old English** - *spec.* The archenemy of humankind; the devil.

¹³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**to enjoin**" - **2.a. - ?c1225** - In early use: To impose (a penalty, task, duty, or obligation); said *esp.* of a spiritual director (*to enjoin penance*, etc.). Hence in modern use: To prescribe authoritatively and with emphasis (an action, a course of conduct, state of feeling, etc.).

¹⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**glamour**" - **2.a. - 1840** - An attractive or exciting quality that makes a person or thing seem particularly appealing or desirable, *esp.* on account of being out of the ordinary or suggestive of a more colourful or thrilling way of life.

¹⁵ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 17:1-3.

1 Corinthians 4 (NJB): ⁵ For that reason, do not judge anything before the due time, until the Lord comes; he will bring to light everything that is hidden in darkness and reveal the designs of *all* hearts.¹⁶

And did you notice how closely the Deceiver holds that stone to his heart, as if what appears to be a stone is his heart that he had just pulled out of his chest? Fanciful? Probably. But it directed my thoughts about this scene in a very different direction.

Ezekiel 36 (NJB): ²⁶ I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead.¹⁷

I am wondering whether Jesus in this famous scene in the Gospels is not so much trying to figure out a way to overcome these temptations to act in ways so utterly unlike Him, so unappealing to Him to choose. Rather, He is looking for a way, if only He could find and open the Deceiver's heart, to bring the latter to repentance, to give him a new heart. Jesus was *always* doing this, with anyone and anywhere He went. Jesus' eyes are fixed not on the temptations but on the Deceiver's stone-cold heart.

Matthew 7 (NJB): ⁹ Is there anyone among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? ¹⁰ Or would hand him a snake when he asked for a fish? ¹¹ If you, then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! ¹⁸

Prayer: "Grant, Almighty God, through the yearly observance of holy Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects."

¹⁶ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), 1 Co 4:5.

¹⁷ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Eze 36:26.

¹⁸ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mt 7:9-11.