

February 25, 2007

1. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, a four-week retreat, St. Ignatius of Loyola dedicates the first week to the subject of sin. He wants the retreatants to realize that God has continued to love them even though they have sinned. Then in the second week he presents Jesus to the retreatants as a king who calls other to come with him and share with him the struggles of war so that they may also share with him his victory. In presenting the Lord as a king Ignatius is on firm biblical ground, *terra firma biblica*, for the NT presents Jesus as a king who is fighting against another king, the evil king, Satan. Ignatius also identifies the way in which the evil king draws people to his own side. First, he tempts people to wealth, then to power, and from there to the basis of all sins, pride.

2. I suspect that Ignatius was drawing on his own personal experience when he described the devil's strategy. He had spent the years from his sixteenth to his twenty-sixth year at the court of the treasurer of the King of Spain. This would have been around 1507 to 1517. Spain was at the height of her powers at this period. Gold was pouring in from its possessions in the new world of Latin America. So perhaps Ignatius saw how some of his young

companions were corrupted by money to buy themselves power and then to end in a world of self-centeredness and pride.

3. Later on, after his own conversion, when he wrote his *Spiritual Exercises*, he also described how the Holy Spirit works on people in just the opposite way than that of the evil one. The Holy Spirit draws people first away from wealth to a desire to be free of possessions, indeed even to real or actual poverty, and from there to a desire to be small and even contemned by other, and from there to humility, to the placing of all one's trust in God rather than self. So the Holy Spirit and the evil work in opposite ways: riches, honor and pride are the devil's tools; poverty, opprobrium and humility are the Holy Spirit's.

4. Today's Gospel presents Jesus to us as tempted by the evil one. Jesus is hungry after his forty-day fast and the evil one tempts him to use his own miraculous powers to feed himself. Then the evil one tempts him to power, promising him all the kingdoms of the world if he will submit to his, the evil one. Finally, the evil one wants Jesus to test God's protection over him. Bread, power and presumption—these are the evil one's ways of pulling Jesus within his own power. What do you think? Are they identical with the ways which Ignatius assigns to the evil one in his *Exercises*? I

think they are. Bread stands for wealth or material possession; power is the same in both, and so is the third temptation, that of pride.

5. And what about ourselves. Is wealth our God? I don't think the pursuit of wealth is much of a temptation for most of us. We are not possessed by a desire for money. Yes, we want enough to live comfortably, and we are careful in our use of money. But that is good. It is not a temptation of the evil one. However, during Lent we can review the way in which we spend the money we have left after all our necessities are provided for. When we look at this, we will see what our own priorities are. And then we can ask ourselves if they are good priorities. Our bishop Thomas Tobin wrote a column not too long ago in the Visitor in which he described his review of his clothes. He found out that he had dozens of shirts, maybe a hundred. I suppose he meant not his dress shirts but his informal wear. "Why do I need all these shirts?" he wrote. So I presume he has gotten rid of them.

Perhaps a review of our closets can be a preparation for a review of our hearts. Maybe this simple action could mean that I am beginning to empty my heart of foolish desires all centered on myself in order to center myself on Christ and his power working

in and through me. It is worth a try. After all, many of us are at that stage of life where we should not be accumulating but getting rid of things, stripping ourselves down so that we move more easily and lightly, simplifying our lives so that we can be more centered on what is truly important.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert. Let us pray that the Spirit may move us during this Lent into our own desert where we can see more clearly what God wants of us.