

St. Thomas Aquinas on Christ's Temptation

By Steven Jonathan Rummelsburg -- July 20, 2015

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There is a bizarre trend in modern academic Biblical exegesis. Modern critical methods of studying the scriptures have concluded in the 20th century that by man's own light, most of what is recounted in the Gospels did not actually happen. Textual, form, source, literary, redaction, and historical criticism draw inductive conclusions based on observable phenomena to pronounce millennia of solid Church teaching inaccurate. The entire academic venture is grounded in skepticism and scientific reductionism. By their methods and standards, it is true that we can be certain of nothing historically, but we ought not to take the reductive and skeptical conclusions for whole and integral truth.

Scriptural studies from the early Church, had always operated under the true assumption that the Gospels' writers were the inspired instruments of God unerringly conveying the Gospel Truth. Christ our Lord, born of the Father before all ages, came down from heaven and became man. He lived, preached, healed, died and is risen! Only some of the events of His life were actually recorded by the Gospel authors, for as John tells us in his Gospel, 21:25, "there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." It is foolish to assume that less and not more actually happened in Christ's life.

We ought to take into account the mass of evidence available to us by the proper use of the intellect and due regard for the marvels of revelation to discern what actually happened. To corroborate this position we have countless excellent saints, scholars, theologians and Popes who throughout the ages have commented authoritatively and articulately on the actual events of Christ's Life. Let us consider the temptation of Christ by Satan in the wilderness. The new Biblical exegetes attempting to demythologize the Gospels deny that the temptation ever happened. Perhaps a look at what the finest Church Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas had to say about the temptation might allay some fear that the modern skeptics are right, for surely they merely stumble in the dark.

In part 3, Question 41 of his masterpiece *The Summa Theologica*, Aquinas answers four questions about Christ's temptation. First, whether or not it "was becoming that Christ should be Tempted?" Then, the role of the desert in Christ's temptation. After that, the time of the temptation and finally, the mode and order of the temptation. In doing so, Aquinas' conclusions imply the historical veracity of Christ's temptation.

Article 1. Whether it was becoming that Christ should be tempted?

Aquinas gives four reasons as to why it was in fact becoming that Christ should be tempted. He tells us that Christ desired to be tempted so that we might be strengthened against the temptations that inevitably assail the faithful. He quotes Gregory the Great who said in a homily "It was not unworthy of our Redeemer to wish to be tempted, who came also to be slain; in order that by His temptations He might conquer our temptations just as by His death He overcame our death." Christ overcame death by His resurrection, surely overcoming temptations is of a lesser magnitude.

Secondly, Christ endured temptation that by His example no holy man would find himself above the possibility of temptation. If the perfect Christ was tempted, so are all men. Christ chose to be tempted after His baptism because as Hilary says "The temptations of the devil assail those principally who are sanctified, for he desires, above all, to overcome the holy." We are often stricken by trial and temptation immediately after conversion. Christ tell us; "take up your cross and follow me." Christ carried His cross as He asks us to. He suffered temptation as we do. To suggest that He did not in fact suffer the temptation in the desert is to deny Christ's example to us.

Aquinas' final two reasons in this first article confirm that Christ actually experienced the temptation after His baptism. St. Augustine wrote in *On the Trinity*, that Christ endured the temptation "that He might be our Mediator in overcoming temptation, not only by helping us, but also by giving us an example." If it never happened, Christ could not be an example. Finally, Aquinas tells us Christ's temptation was to

"fill us with confidence in His mercy. Hence it is written Hebrews 4:15, "We have not a high-priest, who cannot have compassion on our infirmities, but one tempted in all things like as we are, without sin." For all the above analysis and reasons, it is plain that St. Thomas Aquinas was certain that Christ endured the temptation in the desert.

Article 2- Whether Christ should have been tempted in the desert?

St. Thomas considers the place where Christ was tempted, the desert. He begins article 2 by explaining that Christ, by His own free will, allowed himself to be tempted by the devil, otherwise there is no way the devil would have ever come near Him. He continues to explain that the "devil prefers to assail a man who is alone, for, as it is written (*Ecclesiastes 4:12*),"if a man prevail against one, two shall withstand him." And so it was that Christ went out into the desert, as to a field of battle, to be tempted there by the devil." Here we can clearly see, surmise and meditate on the fact that it was the will of the Father that Christ be tempted. He set up the right conditions so that for our own salvation we might have the perfect model to imitate.

To illuminate the meaning of Christ's purposeful actions, Aquinas quotes St. Ambrose who is commenting on Luke 4:1 where it is written that "Christ was led into the desert for the purpose of provoking the devil." If Christ himself had not done spiritual combat with Satan, we would not have our model for victory. Ambrose continues that "Christ in doing this set forth the mystery of Adam's delivery from exile," who had been expelled from paradise into the desert, and "set an example to us, by showing that the devil envies those who strive for better things." Aquinas, with support from St. Ambrose and sacred scriptures, lends credence to the real fact that Christ did in fact endure the temptation in the desert.

Article 3- Whether Christ's temptation should have taken place after his fast?

Aquinas' third article concerns three reasons it was becoming for Christ to experience the temptation after a 40 day fast. First of all, we are all in need of an example of fasting. We can hardly contemplate Christ's temptation without thinking of the kind of hunger that might accompany 40 days without food. By His example, we are armed with awareness of the necessity of fast-

ing to be able to resist temptation, for denying our appetites is akin to the fight against temptation.

Secondly, Christ demonstrates by His fast that the devil assaults even those faithful souls who fast. As Chrysostom said of Christ's fasting in a homily, it was "to instruct thee how great a good is fasting, and how it is a most powerful shield against the devil; and that after baptism thou shouldst give thyself up, not to luxury, but to fasting; for this cause Christ fasted, not as needing it Himself, but as teaching us."

Thirdly, it was Christ's hunger that drew the devil in and to tempt Him first with satisfying His hunger. As St. Hilary said "it was not because He was overcome by want of food, but because He abandoned His manhood to its nature. For the devil was to be conquered, not by God, but by the flesh." Considering the above three reasons for the temptation following the fast it is absurd to assume that Christ did not fast and did not face the temptation just because we cannot find material evidence for it. As faithful Catholics, it treads a dangerous line to question the veracity of the suffering our Lord endured for our sakes based on such narrow considerations as the modern exegetes use.

Article 4- Whether the mode and order of the temptation were becoming?

Aquinas said the devil's temptations take the form of suggestions and these suggestions from Satan are not made to all people in the same way, they "must arise from those things towards which each one has an inclination. Consequently the devil does not straight away tempt the spiritual man to grave sins, but he begins with lighter sins, so as gradually to lead him to those of greater magnitude." As Gregory the Great said, "vices begin by insinuating themselves into the mind under some specious pretext." And it is noted here that by this form, Satan tempted our first parents.

Christ's temptation in the desert illustrates for us the general character of all of Satan's temptations towards all men for all time from Adam and Eve to the present as the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and to the pride of life. Aquinas explains using Pope Leo's words that Christ resisted these "temptations by quoting the authority of the law, not by enforcing His power, so as to give more honor to His human nature and a greater punishment to His adversary, since the foe of the human race was vanquished, not as by God, but as by

man." Christ could not conquer Satan by his perfect humanity if He had not in fact, historically experienced the temptation in the desert, it is a bizarre contradiction to suggest it.

Christ's temptation comprises a multitude of lessons.

St. Thomas Aquinas would hardly have considered the temptation a topic worth memorializing or contemplating had it never happened. If we conclude with the modern exegete that the temptation did not happen, then we must also necessarily say that St. Thomas Aquinas' work on this matter was done in vain. It is worth noting that if we look at the end of the life of a modern exegete and compare it to the end of St. Thomas' life, the difference could not be greater. The modern exegete demythologizes the Gospels and ends in the darkness of disbelief as demonstrated by Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann. On the other hand, St. Thomas Aquinas, having been gifted the Beatific Vision could no longer suffer the mundane, even his own inspired writing projects. He ended certain of the joyful knowledge of the incarnate Christ and the sure prospect of ending face to face with God for all eternity.

It is disconcerting that there is a veritable army of modern exegetes who use reductive modern critical methods of interpretation to conclude that events like the temptation in the desert never happened. Their appeal is alluring because it plays on our disordered desire to be the arbiters of truth. If we choose to side with the modern exegetes, we ought to keep in mind that we rule against the entirety of revelation by the tradition of countless saints in heaven, the Church fathers, doctors, Popes and theologians.

The preponderance of historical evidence and consensus is in accord with the sacred scriptures conveyed by the Magisterium of Holy Mother Church. Christ was tempted in the desert by Satan, for the redemption and fulfillment of the first Adam who fell when faced with his temptation, then as a foreshadowing of Christ's passion, and finally as a guide for us from the perfect teacher on the temptations the faithful will have to face as we observe that the fullness of time unfolds the events of Salvation History. To conclude that it never happened is an offense against the authority and integrity of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit and all who know, love and serve our Trinitarian Lord. Let us choose the saints over the modern exegetes, it is an eternally better choice.

Mass Intentions

Sunday March 12th

- 6:00 am In Memory of Msgr. Anton Frank; requested by the parish.
- 9:30 am For the repose of the souls of Jose and Irene Cortina; requested by the Cortina family.
- 11:00 am For the parish
- 5:30 pm For the repose of the soul of James Sullivan; requested by Mark Sullivan.

Monday March 13th

- 6:30 am For the special intention of Sandra Forero Richards; requested by her family.
- 12:10 pm For the special intention of Rosie Ortega; requested by a friend.

Tuesday March 14th

- 6:30 am For the repose of the soul of Roque P. Flores; requested by his family.
- 12:10 pm For the repose of the souls of John and Florine Turlak; requested by Paul and Joyce Turlock.

Wednesday March 15th

- 6:30 am For the special intention of Mia Watkins; requested by Jonathan and Ava Camara.
- 12:10 pm For the special intention of Caryn Vukelich; requested by Rosie Ortega.

Thursday March 16th

- 6:30 am For the repose of the souls of Vincent Nguyen and Maria Phan; requested Kevin Nguyen.
- 12:10 pm For the repose of the soul of Steven Sim; requested by the Crowe Family.

Friday March 17th

- 6:30 am For the repose of the souls of the Michels, Kiibbler, and Uschak families.
- 12:10 pm For the special intention of Alexandra Munoz; requested by her mother.

Secondary Intention For the protection of the unborn and end to the abortion slaughter.

Saturday March 18th

- 8:00 am For the special intention of the Milam and Steely families; requested by Stella Milam.
- 5:30 pm For the repose of the soul of Maria Guerrero; requested by Sandy Guerra.

Sunday March 19th

- 6:00 am For the repose of the soul of Josephine Emmitte; requested by A.J. Emmitte.
- 9:30 am For all husbands and fathers.
- 11:00 am For the parish.
- 5:30 pm For the special intention of Dave Damasauskas, requested by a friend.

Annunciation Catholic Church

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Lent

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Weekend Mass:

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Saturday Vigil and Sunday Masses:

5:30 p.m. Saturday Vigil Mass—English Novus Ordo

6:00 a.m. Sunday—English Novus Ordo

8:00 a.m. Sunday—Tridentine Mass

9:30 a.m. Sunday—English Novus Ordo

11:00 a.m. Sunday—Latin Novus Ordo

5:30 p.m. Sunday—English Novus Ordo

Sacrament of Penance (Confessions): 15 minutes before Mass