

“...Into Temptation...” ?

January 25, 2020

A reader asks a classic question concerning the Lord’s Prayer, where it says, “Lead us not into temptation.” Surely temptation is an evil. How can the infinitely good God lead us into an evil? Yet if we pray to Him not to lead us into evil, it stands to reason that He can do so. But how is that possible? For “Lead us not into temptation” is the literal translation of the original text in Greek – “μη εισενεγκης ημ_{ας} εις πειρασμον”– and the Church teaches that the original text in Greek was inspired by God Himself. How can God Himself declare that He can lead us into temptation? Four truths need to be established:–

1 Firstly, God can want physical evil, like for instance an illness to punish morally evil human beings, but **it is absolutely impossible for God to want moral evil**, because that is sin, and God cannot possibly sin, because He is Goodness Itself, because He is Being Itself. For if anything at all exists, then a First Cause must exist, and that First Cause can have had no finite limits set to its Being by any cause prior to Its First self, so it is Infinite Being. Now where there is being there is goodness, and vice versa, in fact the two are interchangeable – evil is always the lack in a being of something due to it, for instance blindness is no evil in a stone, but it is an evil in an animal that normally has sight. Therefore the Infinite Being is infinitely good, or Infinite Goodness, incapable of directly wanting or causing moral evil. Few things are more absolutely certain than that.

2 However, **God can allow moral evil** because He can and does always draw out of it a greater good. We human beings can by no means always see in what that greater good consists, but at the latest at the General Judgment, all of us will see clearly the supreme Wisdom of allowing every moral evil which He ever allowed. Here is a useful comparison – from the underside of a

woven carpet I can only guess at the beauty of the pattern on the carpet's over-side. But that beauty exists, and without it I would not be seeing the underside which enables me at least to guess at the beauty invisible from the underside.

3 *Objection: but God is still acting in order to allow moral evil, e.g. temptation to sin. For instance in several verses of Exodus VII-XIII, Scripture says that God "hardened the Pharaoh's heart," for him to sin against the Israelites.* Solution: no, **whenever God allows a moral evil, He commits no positive act**, He merely abstains from granting the grace or help with which the sinner would not have sinned. *But by choosing to allow the Pharaoh to sin, he was positively leading the Pharaoh into temptation and sin.* No, because Scripture says, "God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it" (I Cor. X, 13).

Therefore sinners being tempted are being given by God all the grace they need not to sin, so long as they themselves want not to sin. It is their own fault if they fall in the temptation.

4 *But whenever sinners fell in temptation, God foresaw that they would do so. Why then did He lead them into it, by allowing it, and by abstaining from giving the grace needed by them not to fall in it?* Negatively, because it is only ever the sinners' fault if in temptation they fall. Positively, St Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises (#322) gives three positive reasons why God can allow spiritual desolation for a soul, and the same reasons apply to spiritual temptation: **God can make good use of moral temptation** to punish us, or to try us, or to teach us. He can punish us by the next temptation for the last sin we committed. Then by putting us to the trial by a temptation, He can make it possible for us to earn great merit, so long as we resist and do not fall. Padre Pio said, "If only souls knew how much they can merit by resisting

temptation, they would positively ask to be tempted.” And lastly God can teach us how truly dependent we are on His help by a temptation that shows us how humble and weak we are without His help.

In conclusion, there is so much good for us sinners that God can draw out of allowing us to be tempted that we need not even ask not to be tempted, but we must ask for the grace not to fall when we are being tempted. Lord, let fire warm me, but never burn me. Let temptation make me merit, but never fall.