The Nature and Limits of Temptation

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil

This deeply mysterious passage of our Lord's humiliation can never be understood by us more than in part. It is full of truths only partially revealed; and from our inability to comprehend them, we must refrain from offering too boldly to interpret the nature of His temptation. Certain great truths, however, we may learn from what is here written. That same Spirit with whom the Son of God was one from everlasting,

and by whom also He was anointed at His baptism, was here His guide to the place of His spiritual conflict with [then each one.] When it is said, He was led of the Spirit, it is to be understood in the same sense as when it is said, He was anointed, tempted, and the like- The man Christ Jesus being susceptible of all these, by reason of His true and proper humanity. That same Spirit by which He was anointed to preach to the meek¹, was also His guide in all that it [behoved] the Messiah to do and to suffer for the [sin] of the world St. Paul tells us that it was "by the Holy Ghost" ² that He ³Isaiah [XI.1.] ⁴Heb. IX.14.

offered Himself to God; and that "He was predestinated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of Sanctification, by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead".³ that is to say, by the Divine Nature in which the Son and the Spirit are one and indivisible. Thus
through the Spirit He was led up of His own free will to be tempted of the devil. It was the onset of the warfare which was to end in the destruction of "him that hath the empire of death."
There is an evident relation, partly of coincidence, and partly of contrast,

³ Rom. I.4

between the temptation of the first Adam in the garden, and of the second Adam in the desert. The first Adam was tempted through the senses, and by the allurements, of self-exaltation, and covetousness of gifts which he did not possess. So with Christ: He was tempted to satisfy His hunger by a miracle; to display His divine nature, by suspending the laws which govern our state, to which He had made Himself subject, and to forsake His Father for the sake of earthly greatness. In the two first temptations, it does not at first sight appear in what the sin to which He was tempted consists. It may be that Satan sought for proof that He was the very Christ, and that he hoped either to destroy or to draw Him from God. His temptations were therefore put in a [...] of incredulity and provocation, like the [rulers] who derided [Him] upon the Cross, saying, "He saved others let Him save Himself, if He be Christ the Elect of God;" and the [malefactor] also, who "blasphemed Him saying if thou be Christ, save thyself and us."¹ These words express a great depth of[ cont---]
mixed with incredulity and fear. It would appear that Satan half knew and half feared lest He were the Christ

¹ St. Luke XXIII. 35,39

and so shaped his temptations as to goad Him, as he thought, into a manifestation of Himself, and in ways that would destroy, the pure integrity of His obedience to God. The temptation lay not to […] in the particular form, as in the moral character and effect of the act. So it was in the first temptation of man. The act was in itself, it may be, indifferent; the [spring] of it was disobedience, and the [end] was death. In this instance it would have been a [renouncing] of subjection to His Father and a defeat of the [ends] for which He had become incarnate. Now, this temptation in the desert was a part of the humiliation of the Son of God. As He took our nature with all its infirmities, it was needful that He should make full trial of our state. As He prayed, wept, and hungered, so also He was tempted. It belonged to the truth of our nature, and to the realities of our state in this world of sin, that He should suffer as we suffer. And this is specially mentioned by St. Paul who encourages us by saying the He was "tempted in all things like as we are, without sin." ¹ It was needful He should learn by experience the full misery and hatefulness of sin, and the weakness and susceptibility of our nature: for this, even the [Omniscient,] because of the perfection of His own

¹Heb IV.15
nature, learned "by the things which He suffered." What humiliation can be greater than that He "who is not a tempter of evils", should be solicited by the horrible and hateful suggestions of mistrustful, presumptuous, self-exalting thoughts, and that with the [taunts] and allurements of the devil? What is more afflicting to holy minds than the haunting suggestions or visions of evil? And yet surely no such trial was ever so afflicting to any other as to the Holy One of God. The absolute holiness of the Godhead was then brought into contact with sin, as the [divine]immortality was brought into the neighbourhood of death upon the cross. It is impossible for us to measure the intense humiliation and spiritual anguish of such a familiarity with the Wicked One. None but God, in whose sight the heavens are not [clean], can know the hatefulness of sin as it was manifested to Christ, or the depth of sorrow and abhorrence which was excited in the soul of Him who was without sin. Again: this temptation, it may be, was as necessary to our redemption as the passion upon the Cross. It was parallel to the temptation of Adam in Eden in this point, that as he by falling subjected us to sin and death, so Christ by overcoming has delivered us from the [same].

The first Adam was our [lead] unto condemnation; the Second is our [lead] unto everlasting life. Now it is to be observed, that our Lord was tempted as a man, and as a man He overcame. He did not put forth divine powers of miracle, nor
support Himself by divine interposition. He might indeed have let loose twelve legions of angels against the tempter; but how then should He have been the example and pledge of mastery to us that are tempted? His victory over the devil was gained by the preparation of prayer and fasting, and by the power of patience and stedfast obedience to God. The [same] shield, and the [same] weapons of offence, we also possess.

His mastery was gained, as His temptation was endured, strictly within the conditions of our humanity. That this conflict was complete is evident from the fact, that though St. Luke says Satan "departed from Him for a time," we no where read that our blessed [Lord] was ever again solicited by his allurements. He was buffeted and blasphemed by the [maliquity] of the devil; contradicted and pursued by the hatred of men; all the powers of darkness were in activity against Him; yet we no where find that he that he was again tempted to withdraw His obedience from His Father in heaven. Even in the last night of agony in the garden, in the midst of exhaustion, fear, and anguish, when the tempter might have seemed to have found a [reason] of peculiar weakness, he did not appear; his work lay elsewhere; he was busied in another direction. He had [compassed] the death of Him whom he could not overcome; he had "entered into [Judas];" he was counter-working, as it might seem, to destroy one whom he could not defile. Now this perfect overthrow of Satan, in our nature, is a mystery out of which our masteries over temptation are derived, as our [falls] are
derived out of the first transgression. Christ has overcome for us; and by virtue of our union with Him, He daily overcomes Satan in and through our regenerate nature, and therein [perpetua]-

ly repeats and carries out His first mastery in the desert. It was this great warfare and victory that St. John saw in his vision. And there was a great battle in heaven, Michael and his angels fought with the dragon, and the dragon fought with his angels: and they prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven. And that great dragon was cast out, that old serpent who is called the devil, and satan, who [seducette] the whole world: and he was cast unto the earth and his angels were thrown down with him. And [heard] a loud voice in heaven, saying: Now is come salvation, and strength, and the Kingdom of Our God, and the power of [his] Christ: because the accuser of our brethren is cast [farther], who accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of the testimony, and they [loved] not their [lives] unto death."¹ Apostles, prophets, martyrs, and saints, all the members of His mystical body became partakers of His mastery over the kingdom of darkness, and over the devil, the prince of this world. So, through persecution, and distress, and torment, in the provinces and cities of the world, in marketplaces and theaters, in the wilderness and in solitude, they overcame the strength and the [subtilty] of the tempter, and in weakness confounded his power, whom all the world worshipped.

This temptation of our Lord Jesus Christ [I] Apoc. XII. 7-11
lays open to us the reality and nature of our own. It lifts the veil which is upon our eyes, the unconsciousness which is upon our hearts, and shews us what is really going on at all times in the spiritual world around us; by what we are beset, and what are the mysterious powers which are exerting themselves upon us. Much that we never suspect to be more than the [effect] of chance, or hazard, or the notion of our own minds or the caprice of fancy, maybe the [agency] of this [...] awful being who tempted both the first Adam, and the Second. There is something very fearful in the thought that Satan, whom we so slight or forget, is an angel- a spiritual being of the highest order- endowed therefore with [energies] and gifts of a superhuman power with intelligence as great as his malice; lofty, majestic, and terrible in his fall. Next to the holy angels, what being can it be more fearful to have opposed to us, and that with intense and vigilant enmity, and at all times hovering invisibly about us? From what we read of the temptation of Christ we may learn.

I First, that it is no sin to be tempted; nor is our being tempted any proof of our being sinful. This is a most [conciliatory] thought; for among the afflictions of life few are so bitter and perpetual as temptation. Sorrows, pain, disappointments, crosses, oppositions, which come upon us from without, are not to be compared in suffering to the inward distress of being tempted to evil deeds, words,

desires and thoughts. The [subtilty] and insinuation of evil is so great that it gains an entrance before we are aware of it; sometimes it seems to glance off by a sort of reflection from things the
most opposite in their nature; sometimes
to be taken into our minds [unperceived]
in the midst of indifferent thoughts, and
then suddenly to unfold itself. Every one
who is seeking for Christian perfection
must have found how thoughts of resent-
ment, pride, self-complacency, [repriming,]
and even others unholy still, sometimes
seem to shoot off from the holiest acts
and contemplations, and again to spring
up out of subjects of the greatest purity
and humiliation; sometimes also in times

of deep sorrow and depression, when our minds
are most remote from any conscious indul-
gence of their own evil. This, and much
more which is implied by this, will
be recognised by all who are seeking after
holiness; and it is this that causes the
bitterest and most sickening distress
of minds. Sometimes it makes us doubt
our whole religious life-almost of
our regeneration. Am I not even [get]
in the flesh, "in the [gall] of bitterness, and in
the [bone] of iniquity" can I dare to pray? is
not even prayer a mere profession?
how can I approach God with a soul
haunted and darkened by such a
presence of evil? It is indeed, well
to be suspicious and self-accusing; for
there can be no doubt but that most

of our mental temptations find their opportunity
in actual faults, past or present, or in
that original taint of sin which is still
in us: that is to say, in those parts of
our nature which are the effects of the fall
of man, and of our own personal disobedience.
But the susceptibility of temptation belongs
to us, not as fallen beings, but as man.
Perfect beings may be tempted, as the
angels; and sinless, as Adam in the garden,
Christ in the desert.
So long as we are in this state of probation, and in the world of conflict between sin and holiness, it must be so. Even though we were made sinless at this very hour, still the power and subtility of evil by which we are surrounded would not cease to approach us, and to force itself upon our perception and our hatred. Thus much we may learn for our comfort: though we should convert it into a [...] if we were to solve the fact of our daily consciousness of evil thoughts and inclinations by this truth alone. It is too true that, for the most part, we are tempted because we have aggravated and inflamed our original sinfulness. We by disobedience have given to it a vividness and appetite which by nature it did not possess. Old thoughts, wishes, associations, practices, are the source of most of our inward defilements. To our natural susceptibility and our original corruption we have added an immeasurable range of inclinations to things forbidden; and on these Satan fastens. However, we may take this comfort: after we have assured ourselves by strict self-examination that the temptation by which we are distressed is not the result of any act of our own will, we may rest in peace, thanking God for the pain it inflicts upon us, praying Him to make that pain, if He sees fit, sharpen and deepen, that it may [issue] in an intense hatred of evil, in a more [...] consciousness of our own misery in lower humiliation and greater purity of heart. Any suffering is to be welcomed which teaches us [horror] and hatred for sin. In this way temptations are turned by the Holy Spirit against themselves. that which in its first intention
would be the defilement, if not then
deadth of the soul, [turns] to chastisement, 
mortification and cleansing. It wakens 
and quickens all the powers of the soul; 
fear, self-restraint, watchfulness, caution, 
sensitive shrinking from the least ap-
pearance of evil, strong and persevering 
efforts to deaden and destroy as much 
as the very liability to be affected 
by temptations. So it was with the 
Corinthians, to whom St. Paul said: 
"For behold this self-same thing, that you 
were made sorrowful according to God 
how great carefulness it worketh in you: 
yea defence, yea indignation, yea fear, 
yea desire, yea zeal, yea revenge: in 
all things you have showed yourselves 
to be undefiled in the matter." ¹ The 
[deep] sorrow and distress are our safe-
² Cor.VII.II. 
guard. We should be in danger if we did 
not feel them; and we are safer as we 
feel them more acutely, and use them 
for our humiliation and spiritual 
cleansing.
2 Another truth following on the last is, that 
nothing can convert a temptation into 
a sin but the consent of our own will. 
This one principle, clearly seen, is a 
key to nine-tenths of all questions of conscience 
on this subject. The worst of temptations, so long as they are, without our will, are 
no part of us: by consent they became 
adopted and incorporated with our spiritual 
nature- thoughts became wishes, and 
wishes interests. Consent is the act of the 
whole inward man. So long as we refuse 
to yield, it matters little what temptations 
beset us: they may distress and darken, 
and even for a time seem to defile our 
hearts; but they cannot overcome us. 
The though of satisfying His natural hunger, 
of vindicating His [divine] Sonship by miracles,
the visions of this false world, the Kingdoms of the earth and the glory of the, were cast like shadows on the clear brightness of our Lord's spirit; but they [won] no assent, left no traces, no deposit of doubt, desire or inclinations. They were simply hateful, and were cast forth with an intense rejection: and that because they encountered a holy will, which is of [divine] strength even in man. In measure it is so in every saint, it may be so with us. As the will is strengthened with energy, and upheld with the pressure of Christ dwelling in the heart of the pure and lowly; so the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil, are expelled from us, and lose all share in our personal existence. This explains the various degrees of power that temptations have over various man. Some seem never mastered by them, some seldom, some often, and some always. Of the first we have spoken enough. The others will be formed in two classes: they are either those who, without positive habits of sin, are also without positive habits of holiness; or those whose habits are [postically (positively?)] unholy. When I say, those who, without positive habits of sins, are also without positive habits of holiness, I mean, such persons as are pure in their lives, benevolent, upright, and amiable, but not devout towards God. This in itself is of course, in our sense, sin, because it is a [coming] "short of the glory" and acceptance of God. I am using "sin" in its popular sense, of wilful acts of evil. Now such people are open to the full incursions of the tempter in the whole extent of that natural sinfulness which is in them. This gives them a predisposition on which he acts with daily success. They are open ad unguarded, and the will that is in
them is weak and undisciplined; it has no expulsive power in it, by which evil is cleared from a heart that is sanctified by a life of holiness. We see such people become inconsistent, vain, ostentatious, worldly, and then designing, [farsighted] for their own interests, selfish, unscrupulous fasle to their friends, their principles, their professions. We are surprised by unexped acts out of keeping with what we believe them to be, and lives of practice in direct opposition to apparent duty. The key of all this is, that they have secretly yielded their will to some temptation, and converted it into their own sin, and that sin is their master. We sometimes see such people deteriorating with a frightful intensity and speed; so much so as to make us remember how awfully the [empti]-ness and preparedness of an [undevout] heart is described by our Lord. The unclean spirit " [saith], I will [return] into my house from whence I came out. And coming he findeth it empty, swept and g[arnished]. Then he goeth, and taketh with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and [dwell] there." I The case, is of course, much more obviously true of those who live lives of positive unholiness. Every sin that a man commits is an invitation to the tempter to tempt him henceforth and to that particular sin. So that every man of a profligate life is the subject of a manifold temptation, which is perpetually multiplying itself. First he is tempted of his own heart, then by Satan, then by consent he tempts Satan to tempt him again in the same forum, circumstances, and details; for by consent he has made that his master-sin. And thenceforward it becomes, as we say, a
ruling sin which is so seldom broken off that St. Peter says of certain, that I St. Matt.XII.44,45.

they have "eyes full of adultery and of sin that ceaseth not." They have an active commerce with the tempter, a mingling of will and desire with him; and the inflammation and power of evil affections become a bondage through which it becomes at last morally impossible to break. And how does this differ from a possession of the devil? Is it not a possession in all the reality of fact and truth? How did Satan enter into the heart of Judas with any fuller or more personal presence than this? How can we otherwise explain the settled deliberate career of sin in which some men live- the perfect im-[penetrableness] of heart and conscience with which they hold out against all warnings, fears and chastisements; as for instance, in sensuality, falsehood, or [pride]?

2 2 St. Peter II. 14

This, then, is the [sense] of the matter: temptations are no sins so long as we keep our will pure from all consent to them: when we consent, they become sins, are infused into our spiritual nature, and are the first admissions of that which in the end may be no less than a possession. 3 And this leads to one point more- I mean, to the nature and limits of the power of temptation. First, it is plain that Satan has no power over the will of man except through itself. It must be won by self-betrayal, or not at all. This is absolutely certain, and lies at the root of the distinction between obedience and disobedience, holiness and sin. Next, it would appear

that he can have us direct power over the
affections. He must approach them, as they lie round the will, through the eye and the ear, the touch or the imagination. Through the senses, the [...] of temptation are ready and direct; and all the world around us [ministers] to [danger]. Therefore our Lord was so searching in His commands to pluck out the offending eye, and to cut off the offending hand. The first visible objects which Satan used to tempt withal were pure creatures of God, the fruit of the tree which God had blessed. So subtle is evil. But since he gained an entrance into the creation of God, he has, through the will and works of wicked man, framed for himself a world of his own, full of the visible forms and suggestions of pride, lust, impurity, covetousness. What else are idolatries, oracles, licentious ceremonies, lying books, unholy sights, [pomps] and wars; or again, false casuistry, sceptical and defiling literature, luxurious arts, worldly grandeur, and the like? And these things find their way into all eyes and ears, and are quickened by the subtle activity of men already corrupt. This world of evil hangs upon us round about, and through it he insinuates the quality of evil into the affections, and by them sways and possesses the will. And again: we cannot doubt that he has still more concealed ways of addressing himself to us. he is a spirit and

we are of a spiritual nature. It is impossible to limit or define the action of intellect on intellect, and imagination on imagination. There are some temptations so peculiar, so sudden, so abrupt in their onset, so contrary to our natural and habitual bias, so disturbing and [...] in their first entrance on the mind, that
we can hardly doubt that the tempter has a direct [access] to the intellectual and imaginative powers of our nature: for instance, religious delusions, in which he appears as an angel of light to the deluded mind. There is, by the common consent of man, such a thing as the direct instigation of the devil, which, though its means of working may be generally through the senses, we cannot doubt is also a work of direct and disembodied evil. Such, for instance, as the unaccountable desire to commit great and eccentric crimes; sudden impulses to do things most feared and hated, concurring with an opportunity unperceived till the impulse detected it. Now though these are extreme cases and such as we are not commonly exposed to, they lay open a law, so to speak, of temptation which has place in our common life. I mean, the direct power and [agency] of Satan on the imagination. It is not necessary now to go further, and to inquire whether the images of the [mind] of which he serves himself are gathered from the ideas of previous experience, or suggested, new and unknown from without. All that we are concerned with now is, to show that he has no hold over the will, nor power over the affections except through the images of the senses and of the mind; and this is a most [consolatory] and most practical truth. It shows us our perfect safety so long as the Spirit of Christ dwells in our hearts: and it teaches us where to watch against the approaches of the tempter. Let us pray then that our eyes, ears, and all senses be mortified; that the cross be upon them all; that no images
of pomp, vanity or lust may pass through
them into the affections of our hearts; that

no visions of sins past, nor remembrance
of any thing that can kindle pride,
anger, resentment, or any unholy passion
may haunt us; that our will may
be dwelt in by the will of our sinless
Lord, who for us overcame [sin] the
desert, and, if we be pure and true,
will "crush Satan under your feet speedily."

[Transcription developed by Pauline Holloway]