(Image: *Christ in the Desert* by Ivan Kramskoi, c. 1872)

At the beginning of this Lenten season, *Catholic Family News* continues its periodic look at the divine plan of salvation through the apparitions of the remarkable 17th-century Spanish nun, Venerable Maria of Agreda. Her extensive writings, known to us as *The Mystical City of God*, served as the record of the revelations which she received from the Blessed Virgin herself on the mystery of salvation and her hidden life as the Mother of our Divine Savior. Today's article is the first of two concerning the 40 days of Christ praying and fasting in the desert, followed by His three temptations by Satan. Sacred Scripture briefly records those events in Matthew 4:1-11, which the Church provides as our Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent. However, in the writings of Ven. Maria those events consume two full chapters. This article, which reflects the first chapter, is based only on the first two verses of that Gospel text, i.e., "Then Jesus was led by the spirit into the desert, to be tempted by the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterwards he was hungry." All text below *(in italics)* is copied from Volume III (The Transfixion), Book One, Chapter XXV. The next article will be based on the following chapter (XXVI) and addresses the rest of Matthew's text, on the temptations of Satan. *The Mystical City of God* is available in print edition in English as well as online.

In recent years, it has regrettably become popular in the Church to "fast" during Lent from things other than food, such as television and other entertainment. The traditional rules of fasting and abstinence were so loosened after Vatican II as to be merely a mild inconvenience for most of us, and a poor substitute for an ingrained and heroic exercise of "vanquishing the flesh." This chapter vividly describes both how and why the innocent Son of God acted to conquer the world, the flesh, and the devil, for His sake and for ours, by a vigorous regimen of solitude, prayer, and fasting. We also learn that Christ was intimately accompanied during His desert fast by Our Blessed Lady from the solitude of her home. Finally, we see why, in the view of Divine Providence, it was essential for Christ to perform this severe penance before the start of His public ministry. For some of us, this year will mark our final Lenten observance. God will have decreed an end to our opportunities to conquer the world, the flesh, and the devil, as did Christ for our sake. Let us not squander this chance to imitate Christ and join Him in atoning for our sins.

*****

By the testimony which the eternal Truth had vouchsafed to give of the Divinity of Christ our Savior, His Person and His teachings were so fully accredited before men that He could have immediately begun His public life and His divine activity and miracles, so that all should have recognized Him as the natural Son of the eternal Father, as the Messiah of the Jews, and the Savior of men. Nevertheless, the Divine Teacher of all holiness did not wish to

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

commence His preaching nor to be known as our Redeemer without having first triumphed over our enemies, over the world, the demon and the flesh, in order that afterwards He might so much the more easily overcome the hellish deceits continually spread about by Satan. By His heroic exercises of virtue, He wished to give us the first lesson of a Christian and spiritual life and to teach us by these triumphs of Christian perfection how we are to strengthen our weakness and discourage our common enemies by continued battle and victories, lest we be otherwise delivered over to them by the fluctuations of our own wills. Although the Lord, as being God, was infinitely above the demon and, as man without deceit of sin, supremely holy and the Master over all creation (1 Pet 2:22); He nevertheless wished to overcome in His human nature, by His personal justice and holiness, all the vices and their author; and, therefore, He offered His most holy humanity to the bufferings of temptation, concealing His superiority from His invisible enemies.

By His retirement Christ our Lord began to conquer and taught us to conquer the world; for it is an established fact that the world is accustomed to forsake those whom it does not need for its earthly purposes, that it does not seek those who themselves do not seek it. Therefore, he who really despises the world must show his contempt by ceasing to have any connection with it in his affections and aspirations. The Lord vanquished also the flesh, teaching us to overcome it by imposing upon His most innocent body such a severe and prolonged fast, though His body showed no rebellion toward the good nor any inclinations to evil. The devil He vanquished by the preaching of the truth, as I shall explain more fully afterward; for all the temptations of the father of lies are wont to come cloaked and veiled in deceitful snares. That the Lord should not enter upon His public teaching and make Himself known to the world before He had gained His triumphs over the body is another warning and admonition against the weakness of our flesh. He wished to caution us against the honors of this world, even those that accrue to us from supernatural favors, as long as our passions are not conquered and as long as we have not vanquished our common enemies. For if the applause of men finds us unmortified and still living under the influence of the enemies within our own selves, the favors and blessings of the Lord offer us little security and the wind of vain glory may overturn even the towering mountains of virtues. It imports much to all men to remember that we carry the treasures of Heaven in most fragile vases (2 Cor 4:7) and that, if God wishes to glorify His Name by our weakness, He will know by what means He shall draw His doings to light. Avoidance of the enemy alone is incumbent upon us and most suitable.

Without delay, Christ our Lord pursued His journey from the Jordan to the desert after His Baptism. Only His holy angels attended and accompanied Him, serving and worshipping Him, singing the divine praises on account of what He was now about to undertake for the salvation of mankind. He came to the place chosen by Him for His fast: a desert spot among

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

bare and beetling rocks, where there was also a cavern much concealed. Here He halted, choosing it for His habitation during the days of His fast (Matt 4:1). In deepest humility He prostrated Himself upon the ground, which was always the prelude of His prayer and that of His most blessed Mother. He praised the eternal Father and gave Him thanks for the works of His divine right hand and for having according to His pleasure afforded Him this retirement. In a suitable manner He thanked even this desert for accepting His presence and keeping Him hidden from the world during the time He was to spend there. He continued His prayers prostrate in the form of a cross, and this was His most frequent occupation in the desert; for in this manner He often prayed to the eternal Father for the salvation of men. During these prayers, for reasons which I shall explain when I come to the prayer in the garden, He sometimes sweated blood.

Many of the wild beasts of the desert came to the neighborhood now inhabited by their Creator; for He sometimes walked about in these regions. With an admirable instinct they recognized Him and gave forth their voices, moving about as if in testimony of His Divinity. But the birds of heaven, of which great multitudes gathered around the Savior, were especially eager in their demonstrations, manifesting their joy at the blessed presence of their divine King and Lord by their sweet and loud singing and in divers other ways. After the Savior had begun His fast, He persevered therein without eating anything for forty days, offering up His fast to the eternal Father as a satisfaction for the disorder and sins to which men are drawn by the so vile and debasing, yet so common and even so much esteemed vice of gluttony. Just as our Lord overcame this vice so He also vanquished all the rest, and He made recompense to the eternal Judge and supreme Legislator for the injuries perpetrated through these vices by men. According to the enlightenment vouchsafed to me, our Savior, in order to assume the office of Preacher and Teacher and to become our Mediator and Redeemer before the Father, thus vanquished all the vices of mortals and He satisfied the offenses committed through them by the exercises of the virtues contrary to them, just as He did in regard to gluttony. Although He continued this exercise during all His life with the most ardent charity, yet during His fast He directed in a special manner all His efforts toward this purpose.

A loving Father, whose sons have committed great crimes for which they are to endure the most horrible punishment, sacrifices all his possessions in order to ward off their impending fate; so our most loving Father and Brother, Jesus Christ, wished to pay our debts. In satisfaction for our pride He offered His profound humility; for our avarice, His voluntary poverty and total privation of all that was His; for our base and lustful inclinations, His penance and austerity; for our hastiness and vengeful anger, His meekness and charity toward His enemies; for our negligence and laziness, His ceaseless labors; for our deceitfulness and our envy, His candid and upright sincerity and truthfulness and the

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

sweetness of His loving intercourse. In this manner He continued to appease the just Judge and solicited pardon for us disobedient and bastard children; and He not only obtained this pardon for them, but He merited for them new graces and favors, so that they might make themselves worthy of His company and of the vision of His Father and His own inheritance for all eternity. Though He could have obtained all this for us by the most insignificant of His works; yet He acted not like we. He demonstrated His love so abundantly, that our ingratitude and hardness of heart will have no excuse.

In order to keep informed of the doings of our Savior, the most blessed Mary needed no other assistance than her continual visions and revelations; but in addition to all these, she made use of the service of her holy angels, whom she sent to her Divine Son. The Lord Himself thus ordered it, in order that, by means of these faithful messengers, both He and She might rejoice in the sentiments and thoughts of Their inmost hearts faith fully rehearsed by these celestial messengers; and thus, They each heard the very same words as uttered by Each, although both Son and Mother already knew them in another way. As soon as the great Lady understood that our Redeemer was on the way to the desert to fulfill His intention, she locked the doors of her dwelling, without letting anyone know of her presence; and her retirement during the time of our Lord's fast was so complete, that her neighbors thought that she had left with her Divine Son. She entered into her oratory and remained there for forty days and nights without ever leaving it and without eating anything, just as she knew was done by her most holy Son. Both of them observed the same course of rigorous fasting. In all His prayers and exercises, His prostrations and genuflections, she followed our Savior, not omitting any of them; moreover, she performed them just at the same time; for, leaving aside all other occupations, she thus profited by the information obtained from the angels and by that other knowledge, which I have already described. Whether He was present or not, she knew the interior operations of the soul of Christ. All His bodily movements, which she had been wont to perceive with her own senses, she now knew by intellectual vision or through her holy angels.

While the Savior was in the desert, He made every day three hundred genuflections, which also was done by our Queen Mary in her oratory; the other portions of her time she spent in composing hymns with the angels, as I have said in the last chapter. Thus imitating Christ the Lord, the Holy Queen co-operated with Him in all His prayers and petitions, gaining the same victories over the vices, and on her part proportionately satisfying for them by her virtues and her exertions. Thus it happened that, while Christ as our Redeemer gained for us so many blessings and abundantly paid all our debts, most holy Mary, as His Helper and our Mother, lent us her merciful intercession and became our Mediatrix to the fullest extent possible to a mere creature.

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

INSTRUCTIONS WHICH THE QUEEN AND LADY GAVE ME

My daughter, corporal penances are so appropriate and fitted to mortal creatures, that the ignorance of this truth and the neglect and contempt of bodily mortification cause the loss of many souls and bring many more into the danger of eternal loss. The first reason why men should afflict their body and mortify their flesh is their having been conceived in sin (Ps 50:7). By this original sin human nature is depraved, filled with passions, rebellious to reason, inclined to evil and adverse to the spirit (Rom 7:23). If the soul allows itself to be carried away by them, it will be precipitated by the first vice into many others. But if this beastly flesh is curbed by mortification and penance, it loses its strength and acknowledges the authority of the spirit and the light of truth. The second reason is that none of the mortals have altogether avoided sinning against God; and the punishment and retribution must inevitably correspond to the guilt, either in this life or the next; therefore, as the soul commits sin in union with the body, it follows that both of them must be punished. The interior sorrow is not sufficient for atonement, if the flesh seeks to evade the punishment corresponding to the guilt. Moreover, the debt is so great and the satisfaction that can be given by the creature so limited and scanty that there remains continual uncertainty whether the Judge is satisfied even after the exertions of a whole lifetime: hence, the soul should find no rest to the end of life.

Even though divine clemency is so liberal with men, that, if they try to satisfy for their sins by penance as far as their limited capacity goes, God remits their offenses and in addition thereto has promised the guilty ones new gifts and graces and eternal rewards; yet His faithful and prudent servants, who really love their Lord, are constrained voluntarily to add other penances; for the debtor who merely wishes to do what he is obliged to and adds nothing of his own freewill, certainly pays his debts, but will remain poor and destitute, if after payment of his debts nothing remains. What then are those to expect, who neither pay nor make any efforts towards paying? The third reason for bodily mortification, and the most urgent one, is the duty of Christians to imitate their divine Teacher and Master. Moreover, my Divine Son and I, without being guilty of any faults, or bad inclinations, devoted ourselves to labors and made our lives a continual practice of penance and mortification of the flesh. It was thus that the Lord saw fit to attain the glory of His body and of His Holy Name, and He wished me to follow Him in all things. If we then pursued such a course of life because it was reasonable, what must be thought of mortals that seek nought but sweetness and delight, and abhor all penances, affronts, ignominies, fasting and mortification? Shall then only Christ, our Lord, and I suffer all these hardships while the guilt-laden debtors and deserves of all these punishments throw themselves head over heels into the filth of their carnal inclinations? Shall they employ their faculties, given to them for the service of Christ, my Lord, and for His following, merely in dancing attendance on their

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

lusts and the devil, who has introduced evil into the world? This absurd position, maintained by the children of Adam, is the cause of great indignation in the just Judge.

It is true, my daughter, that by the bodily afflictions and mortifications of my most blessed Son, the defects and deficiencies of human merits have been atoned for; and that He wished me, as a mere creature and as one taking the place of other creatures, to co-operate with Him most perfectly and exactly all in His penances and exercises. But this was not in order to exempt men from the practice of penance, but in order to encourage them to it; for in order merely to save them, it was not necessary to suffer so much. Our blessed Savior, as a true Father and Brother, wished also to enhance the labors and penances of those who were to follow in His footsteps; for the efforts of creatures are of little value in the eyes of God unless they are made precious by the merits of Christ. If this is true of works which are entirely virtuous and perfect, how much more is it true of those which are infected with so many faults and deficiencies, even in the greatest acts of virtue, as ordinarily performed by the children of Adam? For in the works of even the most spiritual and virtuous persons, many deficiencies occur. These deficiencies are made good by the merits of Christ, our Lord, so that the works of men may become acceptable to the eternal Father. But those who neglect good works and remain altogether idle can by no means expect to apply to themselves the good works of Christ; for they have in themselves nothing that can be perfected by the works of Christ, but only such things as deserve condemnation. I do not speak now, my daughter, of the damnable error of some of the faithful, who have introduced into the works of penance the sensuality and vanity of the world, so that they merit greater punishment for their penance than for their sins, since they foster in their penances vain and imperfect purposes and forget the supernatural ends of penance, which alone give value to penance and life to the soul. On some other occasion, if necessary, I will speak of this error; do thou now deplore this blindness and labor with great zeal; for if thy labors were even as great as that of the Apostles, Martyrs, Confessors, they would be no greater than they should be. Chastise thy body with ever greater severity, and remember that thou art deficient in many things, while thou hast but a short life and art so weak and incapable of repaying thy debts.

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.