We return, once again, to the writings of the 17th-century Spanish nun, Venerable Maria of Agreda. Drawing from her spiritual classic, *The Mystical City of God*, we examine the three temptations of Christ by Satan after His period of fasting in the desert and before the start of His public ministry.

Every year on the first Sunday in Lent, Holy Mother Church gives us the Gospel account of Christ's fasting and temptation in the brief text of Matthew 4:1-11. *The Mystical City of God*, however, devotes two full chapters to these events. In our previous article, *Christ in the Desert*, we focused on the Lord's prolonged and severe regimen of solitude, prayer and fasting, to which Matthew devotes only two verses. In this companion piece, we turn to the three temptations by Lucifer himself to which the Son of God willingly and purposely subjected Himself.

This chapter is one of many in *The Mystical City of God* which describe the furious efforts of Satan to discover the truth about the Virgin Mary and her Son. Because they were so obviously different from other men, so spiritually pure and resistant to his seductions, Satan both despised them and feared what they might do to break his power over the children of Adam. As a lesson for us, the Savior did not "debate" with Satan over his temptations, but answered him bluntly. Satan was already aware of the power and authority of Scripture and attempted to misuse it to entice Our Lord to sin. Yet Christ knew precisely how to respond and vanquished his enemy in a few words. While the text of Matthew would lead us to conclude that the entire encounter between Christ and Satan might have lasted perhaps no more than an hour, we read in *The Mystical City of God* that it lasted about five days. And thus, we learn that not only was the fasting of Christ severe and prolonged, but his subjection to temptation was likewise. The chapter concludes with a question by Maria about the celestial food given to Our Lord given by angels to Our Lord in the desert, which receives an intriguing, even mystical response from the Blessed Virgin.

The Mystical City of God serves as the record of the revelations which Ven. Maria of Agreda received from the Blessed Virgin herself on the mystery of salvation and her hidden life as the Mother of our Divine Savior. All text below *(in italics)* is copied from Volume III (The Transfixion), Book One, Chapter XXVI. *The Mystical City of God* is available in print edition in English as well as online.

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In the twentieth chapter [The Transfixion, Book One, Chapter XX] *I have related how Lucifer came forth from the infernal caverns in order to find and tempt the Divine Master. I mentioned also that the Lord concealed Himself in the desert, where, after a fast of about forty days, He permitted the tempter to approach Him, as told by the Evangelists (Matt 4:2).*

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Coming to the desert and finding the object of his search alone, Lucifer was highly rejoiced; for he found Jesus separated from His Mother, whom he and his satellites esteemed their Enemy on account of the defeats they had suffered at her hands. As he never had entered into any contest with the Lord, and as Mary was absent, the dragon in his pride accounted his victory secure. But when Lucifer and the other demons observed their Opponent more closely, they began to feel great fear and discouragement. Not because they recognized His Divinity, for of this they had no suspicions as long as they saw Him so despised; nor because of any previous experience with Him, for as yet they had measured their forces only with the heavenly Queen; but because they saw manifested in His exterior so much reserve and so much majesty, and because His actions were so perfect and heroic, that they inspired great fear and dread. His behavior and His condition were totally different from those of other men, whom they had tempted and easily overcome. Lucifer conferred about these matters with his demons, saying, "What manner of man is this, who is so adverse to the vices by which we assail other men? If He is so forgetful of the world and has His flesh in such entire subjection and control, how shall we find any opening for our temptations? How shall we hope for victory, if He has deprived us of the weapons, by which we make warfare among men? I have many misgivings about this contest." So great is the value and power of contempt of the world and subjection of the flesh that they fill with terror the devil and all hell; and the demons would not rise up against us in such pride, if they would not find men subject to these tyrants before he comes to tempt them.

Christ the Savior permitted Lucifer to remain under the false impression that He was a mere human creature though very holy and just; He wished to raise his courage and malice for the contest, for such is the effect of any advantages espied by the devil in his attacks upon the victims of his temptations. Rousing his courage by his own arrogance, he began this battle in the wilderness with greater prowess and fierceness than the demons ever exhibited in their battles with men. Lucifer and his satellites strained all their power and malice, lashing themselves into fury against the superior strength which they soon found in Christ our Lord. Yet our Savior tempered all His actions with divine wisdom and goodness, and in justice and equity concealed the secret source of His infinite power, exhibiting just so much as would suffice to prove Him to be a man so far advanced in holiness as to be able to gain these victories against the infernal foes. In order to begin the battle as man, He directed a prayer to the eternal Father from His inmost soul, to which the intelligence of the demon could not penetrate, saying: "My Father and eternal God, I now enter into battle with the enemy in order to crush his power and humble his pride and his malice against My beloved souls. For Thy glory and for the benefit of souls I submit to the daring presumption of Lucifer. I wish thereby to crush his head in order that when mortals are attacked by his temptations without their fault, they may find his arrogance already broken. I beseech Thee, My Father, to remember My battle and victory in favor of mortals assailed by the common

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enemy. Strengthen their weakness through My triumph, let them obtain victory; let them be encouraged by My example, and let them learn from Me how to resist and overcome their enemies."

During this battle the holy angels that attended upon Christ were hidden from the sight of Lucifer, in order that he might not begin to understand and suspect the divine power of our Savior. The holy spirits gave glory and praise to the Father and the Holy Ghost, who rejoiced in the works of the Incarnate Word. The most blessed Virgin also from her oratory witnessed the battle in the manner to be described below. The temptation of Christ began on the thirty-fifth day of His fast in the desert, and lasted to the end of the fast, as related by the Evangelists. Lucifer assumed the shape of a man and presented himself before the Lord as a stranger, who had never seen or known Him before. He clothed himself in refulgent light, like that of an angel, and, conjecturing that the Lord after His long fast must be suffering great hunger, he said to Him: "If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread" (Matt 4:3). By thus cunningly resting his advice on the supposition of his being the Son of God, the demon sought some information on what was giving him the greatest concern. But the Savior of the world answered only in these few words: "Not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Christ took the words from the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy. But the devil did not penetrate into the meaning given to these words by Christ, for Lucifer understood Him to mean that God could sustain the life of man without bread or any other nourishment. But though this was also the true signification of these words, yet our Divine Master included a much deeper meaning; desiring by these words to say to the devil: This Man, with whom thou speaks, lives in the word of God, which is the Divine Word, hypostatically united to His humanity. Though that was precisely what Lucifer desired so much to know, he did not deserve to understand the words of the God-man, because He did not wish to adore Him as true God.

Lucifer found himself repulsed by the force of this answer and by the hidden power which accompanied it; but he wished to show no weakness, nor desist from the contest. The Lord allowed the demon to continue in his temptation and for this purpose permitted Himself to be carried by the devil bodily to Jerusalem and to be placed on the pinnacle of the temple. Here the Lord could see multitudes of people, though He Himself was not seen by anybody. Lucifer tried to arouse in the Lord the vain desire of casting Himself down from this high place, so that the crowds of men, seeing Him unhurt, might proclaim Him as a great and wonderful man of God. Again using the words of the holy Scriptures, he said to Him: "If Thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down, for it is written (Ps 91:11) that 'He hath given His angels charge over Thee, and in their hands they shall bear Thee up, lest perhaps Thou dash Thy foot against a stone'" (Matt 4:6). The heavenly spirits who accompanied their King, were full of wonder, that He should permit Lucifer to carry Him bodily in his hands, solely

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for the benefit of mortal man. With the prince of darkness were gathered innumerable demons, for on that occasion hell was almost emptied of its inhabitants in order to furnish assistance for this enterprise. The Author of wisdom answered, "It is also written: 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God'" (Deut. 6:16). While giving these answers, the Redeemer of the world exhibited a matchless meekness, profoundest humility, and a majesty so superior to all the attempts of Satan, as was of itself alone sufficient to crush Lucifer's arrogance and to cause him torments and confusion never felt before.

Being thus foiled, he attacked our Lord in still another way, seeking to rouse his ambition by offering Him some share in his dominion. For this purpose he took the Lord upon a high mount, from whence could be seen many lands, and said to Him with perfidious daring: "All these will I give to Thee, if falling down, Thou wilt adore me" (Matt 4:9). Exorbitant boldness, and more than insane madness and perfidy! Offering to the Lord what he did not possess, nor ever could give, since the earth, the stars, the kingdoms, principalities, riches and treasures, all belong to the Lord, and He alone can give or withhold them when it serves and pleases Him! Never can Lucifer give anything, not even of the things of the earth, and therefore all his promises are false. The King and Lord answered with imperial majesty: "Begone, Satan, for it is written: The Lord thy God thou shalt adore, and Him only shalt thou serve." By this command, "Begone Satan," Christ the Redeemer took away from Lucifer permission to further tempt Him, and hurled him and all his legions into the deepest abysses of hell. There they found themselves entirely crushed and buried in its deepest caverns, unable to move for three days. When they were permitted again to rise, seeing themselves thus vanquished and annihilated, they began to doubt whether He, who had so overwhelmed them, might not be the Incarnate Son of God. In this doubt and uncertainty they remained, without ever being able to come to certain conviction until the death of the Savior. Lucifer was overcome by hellish wrath at his defeat and was almost consumed in his fury.

Our divine Conqueror Christ then sang hymns of praise and thanks to the eternal Father for having given Him this triumph over the common enemy of God and man; and amid the triumphal songs of a multitude of angels, He was borne back to the desert. They carried Him in their hands, although He had not need of their help, since He could make use of His own divine power; but this service of the angels was due to Him in recompense for enduring the audacity of Lucifer in carrying to the pinnacle of the temple and to the mountain top the sacred humanity of Christ, in which dwelt substantially and truly the Divinity itself. It would never have entered into the thoughts of man, that the Lord should give such a permission to Satan, if it had not been made known to us in the Gospels. But I do not know which deserves the greater astonishment: that He should consent to be carried about from one place to another by Lucifer, who did not know Him; or that He should allow Himself to be sold by Judas, or to be received in the holy Sacrament by this treacherous disciple and by so many

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sinful members of the Church, who do know Him to be their God and yet receive Him unworthily. What we certainly must wonder at is that He permitted as well the one as the other and that He continues to permit it for our benefit and in order to draw us to Him by His meekness and by His patient love. O sweetest Master of my soul! How sweet, and kind, and merciful art thou not toward the souls! (Joel 2:13). Out of purest love Thou didst descend from Heaven to earth for them, Thou didst suffer and give away Thy life for their salvation. Mercifully Thou waits for them and bears with them, Thou calls and seeks after them; Thou receives them and dost enter into their bosom; Thou yield Thyself entirely to them and anxiously desires them to be Thine. What transfixes and bursts my heart is that, while Thou seeks to draw us to Thee out of pure love, we fly from Thee and respond to all Thy excesses of love only by ingratitude. O immense love of my God, so badly repaid and so little acknowledged! Give me, O Lord, fountains of tears to weep over this wrong, which is so deeply to be deplored, and let all the just of the earth help me. When the Lord had been carried back to the desert, the angels, according to the Gospel, ministered unto Him (Matt 4:11); for at the end of his temptation and fast, they served Him with a celestial food, in order that His sacred body might again be invigorated. Not only were the angels present to rejoice at this divine banquet, but also the birds of the desert came in order to contribute to the recreation of their Creator by their harmonious songs and graceful movements; and in their own way the wild animals of the desert joined them, throwing off their native wildness and producing their joyful antics and sounds in acknowledgment of the victory of their Lord.

Let us return to Nazareth, where, in her oratory, the Princess of the angels had witnessed the battles of her most holy Son. She had seen them all by the divine light already described and by the uninterrupted messages of her angels, who brought them back and forth between the Savior and the blessed Queen. She repeated the same prayers as the Lord and at the same time. She entered likewise into the conflict with the dragon, although invisibly and spiritually. From her retreat she anathemized [denounced] and crushed Lucifer and his followers, cooperating in all the doings of Christ in our favor. When she perceived that the demon carried the Lord from place to place, she wept bitterly, because the malice of sin reduced the King of Kings to such misusage. In honor of all the victories, which He gained over the devil, she composed hymns of praise to the Divinity and the most holy humanity of Christ, while the angels set them to music and were sent with them to congratulate Him for the blessings won for the human race. Christ on His part sent back the angels with words of sweet consolation and rejoicing on account of His triumphs over Lucifer.

And since she had been His faithful companion and sharer in His labors and fasts of the desert, the Lord sent her some of the celestial food and commanded the angels to present and minister it to her. Wonderful to record, the great multitudes of the birds that had gathered around the Savior, flew after these angels with a heavier, yet an exceedingly swift

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flight, and entered the dwelling of the Queen of Heaven and earth; and while the blessed Lady partook of the food sent to her by her Son, they sang and chirped before our Lady in the same way as they had done in the presence of the Savior. The most holy Virgin tasted the heavenly food, now even more precious to her, since it came from and was blessed by the hands of her Son; and by it she was again rejoiced and strengthened after her long and rigorous fast. She gave thanks to the Almighty and humiliated herself to the very earth; and the acts of her virtue were so heroic and excellent, that our words and conceptions are not able to encompass them. We shall see them in their true light, when we shall rejoice with the Lord; then we shall give glory and praise for these ineffable blessings, as is due Him from all the human race.

QUESTION WHICH I ASKED THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN, MOST HOLY MARY

Queen of all the heavens and Mistress of the universe, thy kind condescension emboldens me to ask Thee, as my Teacher and Mother, for information concerning a certain doubt raised in my mind by the mention of the celestial food, which the angels served to the Savior in the desert. I understood it to be of the same quality as that served to Thee and to the Lord on other occasions, when the ordinary food was wanting. I have called it celestial food, because I had no other name for it; yet I do not know if that name is appropriate. For I am uncertain whence this food was procured and what was its nature. In heaven I understand, there is no need of bodily food, for there the earthly mode of sustaining life is not continued. Although the blessed enjoy also sensible delight from created objects, and also the taste must have its proper function in heaven just as the other senses, I suspect that its pleasures are not derived from the eating of food, but from some overflow of the soul's glory into the body and its senses. Thus the grossness and imperfection of the senses in mortal life have no share in their heavenly activity and in its objects. Of all this, I, being so ignorant, desire to be informed by thy motherly kindness and condescension.

ANSWER AND INSTRUCTION GIVEN ME BY THE HEAVENLY LADY

My daughter, thou hast well doubted: for it is true, that in heaven no material food or nourishment is used, as thou hast already understood and declared. The food which the angels brought to my holy Son and to me, was truly a heavenly food, and I myself have suggested this name to thee, because the strength of this food is heavenly and not earthly, where everything is gross, very material and limited. It will help thee to understand something of the quality of this food, and the manner of its creation, when I tell thee that the Lord, to supply our wants, made use of some created material, most ordinarily water, on account of its clearness and simple composition; for the Lord does not require complicated matter for His miracles. At other times it was bread or some kinds of fruit. These materials He furnished with such a power and such qualities of taste that they exceeded, as heaven

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does the earth, all the delicacies here below. There is nothing in the world which can be compared to them; for all other food is insipid and without strength in comparison to this celestial food. To understand this the better, consider the examples mentioned in holy Scripture: for instance the food given to Elias, by the strength of which he walked for forty days and nights to Mount Horeb; the manna, which was called the bread of the angels, because they prepared it by condensing the vapors of the earth (Exod. 16:14) and thus condensed and shaped like grain, they showered it upon the earth. It possessed a great variety of tastes, as Scripture tells us, and it was very nourishing to the body. Also, the water converted into wine by the most holy Son at the nuptials of Cana was of such good taste and strength, that it excited the admiration of the guests (John 2:10).

In the same way as the Lord gave a supernatural excellence to the water and turned it into a most sweet and delicate liquor, so He also gave a spiritual strength to the bread or the fruit. Such nourishment restored the waste of bodily strength and delighted the senses in an admirable manner, renewing their vigor and fitting them for labors and difficulties without causing the least loathing or inconvenience. This kind of food was ministered by the holy angels to my most holy Son after His fast, and this I and my spouse Joseph received on different occasions. The Almighty showed the same favor also to some of his friends and servants, rejoicing them with heavenly food, although not so frequently and in so wonderful a manner as He did us. Thy doubt is then answered; but now listen to the instruction pertaining to this chapter.

In order to understand better what thou hast written, thou must keep in mind three motives of our Lord in entering upon this battle with Lucifer, and this understanding will furnish thee great light and strength against Satan and his followers. His first motive was to destroy sin and the seeds of sin, sown in the human nature by Satan in the first transgression of Adam. These seeds are the seven capital vices: pride, avarice, lust and the others, being the seven heads of the dragon. Lucifer appointed an infernal chieftain over each one of these vices in the battle of hell against the human race, and the evil spirits were distributed into squadrons under these leaders in order to maintain the sort of orderly confusion, which I have described in the first part of this heavenly history (Volume I, the Conception, para 103). Accordingly, my divine Son entered into conflict with each one of these princes of darkness, vanquishing them and destroying their power. In the Gospels only three temptations are mentioned, being those which are more manifest to the senses; but the conflict and the triumph was far more extensive, for Christ our Lord overcame all these princes and their vices. Pride He overcame by his humility; anger, by his meekness; avarice, by his contempt for riches; and all the other vices, by their corresponding virtues. The greatest defeat and consternation, however, overtook these enemies at the foot of the Cross, when they became certain that it was the incarnate Word who had conquered and crushed

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them. Since that time they are timid in entering into conflict with those men, who rely on the power and triumph of my Son.

The second motive for engaging in this conflict was obedience to the command of the eternal Father, who not only wished Him to die for men, and redeem them by His Passion and Death, but also to enter into battle with the demons and vanquish them by the force of His incomparable virtues. The third motive, and the one that was consequent upon the second, was to furnish mankind an example and a model for triumphing over their enemies and to take away from all men any cause of wonder or surprise at being tempted and persecuted by the devils. He wished that all should have this consolation in their temptations and conflicts, that their Redeemer and Teacher first suffered them in His own Person (Heb 4:15); for, though in some respects His temptations were different from ours, yet in substance, they were entirely the same, only of greater satanic force and malice. My Lord permitted Lucifer to strain all his powers in his battle with Him, in order that by His divine power He might crush and enfeeble hell in its battles against mankind, making it easier for us to overcome them, if we wish to avail ourselves of the advantages gained by this very conflict of our Redeemer. All mortals have need of this instruction, if they are to vanquish the demon; but thou, my daughter, need it more than many generations on account of the wrath of this dragon against thee and on account of thy natural weakness in battle, when not assisted by my teaching and this example. Before all see that thou keep in subjection thy flesh and the influences of the world. Mortifying thy flesh and fleeing the world by retiring from creatures to the interior of thy soul, thus conquering both these enemies and preserving the blessed light of grace, which thou there receives, and loving nothing except in as far as well-ordered charity permits. For this purpose, renew in thyself the memory of the narrow path pointed out to thee; for the Lord has given thee a natural faculty of ardent love, and We wish that thou consecrate this faculty entirely to the love of God. Consent not to any movement of thy appetites, no matter in how small a matter; and allow thy senses no liberty, except for the exaltation of the Most High, or for suffering or doing something for the benefit and love of thy neighbor. If thou obey me in all things, I will see that thou art protected and strengthened against this cruel dragon for the battles of the Lord (1 Sam. [Kings] 25:28). A thousand shields will surround thee both for defense and offense against the demon. Accustom thyself always to use against him the words of Holy Writ, not deigning to exchange many words with such an astute enemy. Weak creatures should not indulge in conferences or arguments with their mortal enemy and the master of lies; since even my Divine Son, who was all-powerful and infinitely wise, did not do so. In this He gave the souls an example how they are to act circumspectly with the devil. Arm thyself with living faith, unwavering hope and love of humility, for these are the virtues by which the dragon is crushed and vanquished and against which he dares not make a stand. He flies from them because they are powerful weapons against his pride and arrogance.

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