

The Chastity of Jesus and the "Refusal to Grasp"

Jean-Pierre Batut

A *harpagmos* is an object unduly possessed, the fruit of a theft, a plunder. . . . From this perspective, every sin is, in essence, a sin against chastity.

The reason we are not in a position to speak about the chastity of Christ is that we cannot do so in an entirely chaste manner. We would like to understand it, but we would also like things to stand for him as they do for us, even if we do not want to admit it to ourselves. For this reason, the Virgin alone truly understands her Son. The Church alone, in the manner in which she shows Christ to us and gives him to us, sets us on the path of conversion, on which, as a matter of course, we begin to understand chastity and to live it.

When St. Thomas meditates on the episode of the temptations in the desert (*Summa Theologica*, III, q.41), he begins by reminding us that the temptation Christ underwent is lived, like all of the mysteries, "for us men and for our salvation." As he says in citing St. Gregory, Jesus had to "conquer our temptations through his own, as he triumphed over our death through his own."

But in what way was Christ tempted, and what relationship is there between the temptations he underwent and his chastity? Even though St. Thomas does not seem to occupy himself with the second question, we hope to show in what follows that the relationship is quite direct. With respect to the first question, as is his wont, St. Thomas makes a distinction. And he

does it by taking up the classical opposition between the *temptations of the flesh and the world*, and those which *have the tempter as their direct author*.

The Temptations "of the Flesh and the World"

This distinction is fundamental. What is meant by "temptations of the flesh and the world" is an order of temptations which presupposes an already sinful person. Is it still necessary, once again, to caution against the eternal misunderstanding of the word "flesh"? Let us recall that "the *flesh* does not mean the human body, as the French word might seem to suggest, but the totality of human tendencies and decisions insofar as they possess a purely earthly horizon," and thus that "the *world* corresponds to this purely earthly concern; the *world* is the sphere of interest which defines man's major concern."¹ In this order of temptations, the concrete person finds himself, even before the temptation presents itself to his consciousness, in a state of disorder with respect to his end, namely, the knowledge of God. His inner compass no longer points north, but rather sways at the whim of gusts of wind and the various solicitations that call upon it.

It is essential to remind ourselves that there exists within us a connivance with evil. Let us not forget that if redemption and baptism bring us already into the new world in which we are freed from sin, there remains in us a connivance with it—what theology calls "concupiscence." The difference is that, henceforward, concupiscence is no longer invincible. Our inner compass, in spite of the storms, once again imperturbably points north: "That concupiscence or the seat [*foyer*] of sin remains in those baptized is confessed and believed by the holy council. Left for our battles, it is not capable of harming those who, refusing to consent to it, resist with courage through the grace of Christ."² The fact that concupiscence is occasionally called "sin" is not because it would be such (for it is one thing to experience it, another to consent to it, and sin resides in this latter alone), but "because it comes from sin and it inclines toward sin."³

¹C. Duquoc, *Christologie*, vol. 1 (Paris: 1968), 64.

²Cf. The Council of Trent, 5th Session (the decree on original sin), *DS* 1515.

³*Ibid.*

Thus, concupiscence, that is, the tendency to sin, comes from sin. If this is how things stand, it is clear that Christ never experienced it, since he is without sin. He himself affirms such, moreover, without the slightest equivocation, for example, during the episode with the adulteress. But if this is the case, since "each person is tempted by his own lust which attracts him and lures him" (Jas 1:14), and since this lust is foreign to Christ, in what sense ought we to say that Christ was tempted?

The Original Temptation

As we were saying earlier, this is the sense of the temptation that comes *directly from the tempter*, "original [*originnaire*] temptation." Of what nature is it? It can in no way concern the *desiderabilia*, desirable "objects": the attraction that leads us to put partial goods in the place of the veritable Good, the only good than can satisfy us, is an already perverted attraction. The man to whom the primordial temptation is addressed is, on the contrary, an *innocent* man. How can we define this innocence? Not simply by saying that this man has not had the experience of evil, because one can lack an experience of evil and be predisposed to commit it, in the sense that the suggestion of sin finds a seat that has been wholly prepared.⁴ We have to add: the innocent man is he whose existence is oriented toward God, and who spontaneously refers all things to God.

Christ is, in Person, this very mode of existing. That is why he is the *Son*. Sonship is precisely nothing else, in its visible effects, than the fact of referring oneself wholly to God in a loving obedience. The worldly dichotomy between the slave (he who obeys through fear of a thrashing) and the son (he who escapes the thrashing, but who allows himself at times to be a real troublemaker) is a fundamentally sinful dichotomy. We compare the scope of St. Paul's message of freedom: "you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear; you have received a *Spirit of sonship* by which we cry out: Abba! Father! The Spirit in person joins himself to our spirit in order to attest that we are

⁴Herein lies the common misunderstanding over the innocence of the child. The fact that he does not yet have an experience of evil does not mean that he is innocent in the sense that Christ is. This distinction does not come to us spontaneously: priests who prepare parents for the baptism of their child can evince the evil they have in order to provoke a proper understanding of the notion of original sin.

children of God. If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and coheirs with Christ, because we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:15-16).⁵

If the temptation coming directly from the tempter does not concern "intrawordly" objects, it bears radically on God, and on God's promise. It seeks to attain man's *faith* in God and in his promise. This temptation is that of the third chapter of Genesis. That is why this biblical passage is *absolutely the only one* to which we can, in complete legitimacy, refer Christ's temptation, because it is the only one that portrays a man who is still younger than sin. We cannot, for example, compare Christ's temptations with the account of David's sin (2 Sm 11; 1 Chr 20): with such an account, we are forthwith in the "dynamics of sin" spoken of in the letter of St. James: "Each one is tempted by his own desire, which attracts him and lures him; then desire, having conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it has come to term, brings forth death" (Jas 1:14-15). The temptation to which David succumbs when he sleeps with Bathsheba is "of the flesh and the world"; it is not the original temptation.

The First Temptation in the Desert and the Fundamental Sin

Christ is thus not "tempted by his own desire"; he is tempted by the tempter.⁶ Temptation does not concern the objects of the world, but God and his Word. We have, here, the content of the *first temptation in the desert*—the only decisive sin, as we intend to show further on: "Thus Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit in order to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, after which he was hungry. And, drawing near, the tempter said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he responded, 'It is written: *man does not live on bread alone, but from every word that issues from the mouth of God*'" (Mt 4:3-4).

⁵As we can see, Paul's affirmations are not specifically "irenic." On the contrary, they emerge from a background of "agony," of struggle. This is true to such an extent that the fact of becoming *like Christ* in this world of sin puts us *ipso facto* in a relation of contradiction, like Christ, with the compromises and connivances of the world. The choice is between being like him and sharing his tribulation or, rejecting tribulation, to slide over to the enemy.

⁶Which obviously does not mean that, in our case, the tempter is not at work. It simply means that what he finds in us greatly facilitates his task.

We will hold ourselves to two comments on this text, which could provoke many others:

1. The text of Deuteronomy 8:3 is less explicit than the citation given by Jesus. It says simply: "man lives on everything that issues from the mouth of the Lord." The explication turns on the *word*. And Satan understands this immediately; he takes care, in the following temptation, to introduce his remarks with a quotation from Scripture.⁷

2. The words *if you are the Son of God* are essential. They reveal that the satanic enterprise takes a *defilialization* as its goal. To make the Son a Son no longer. And to do so by suggesting that he *prove that he is* the Son. Why? Because the Son is he who has power over everything that belongs to the Father. What is more natural than to make use of this power? And what is more normal than to make use of it by exercising it? We realize, here, that, if we push this logic to its end, we face the problem of specifying precisely wherein the temptation is perverse. This is because its perversion turns on a simple nuance, which lies not in the order of rights but in the order of love. The "prodigal son" in Luke 15 is within his rights, and claims only that which rightly belongs to him, and nothing more. So, where is his sin? His sin is more fundamental than the wounding and absurd external attitude that expresses it.

The sin is the rejection of sonship. We might offer the following definition of this rejection: to be no longer a son means to stop desiring that what one possesses exist only in be-

⁷We find here a precious element for ordering the three temptations into a hierarchy and for preferring Matthew's version to that of Luke. For the third temptation in Matthew's account, Satan no longer has any citation from scripture at his disposal. Christ, for his part, still has scripture at hand, and this citation is the first commandment of the Decalogue. Having begun at the root, the trial returns to the root: the filial relation. But this circular route is a virtuous circle, a triumphal path (cf. Ps 67:1ff.). At every stage, the tempter is defeated. In order for this triumphal path to be communicated to us, it remains to be retraced through the *via crucis*.

On the other hand, in proportion as the drama of temptations progresses, it becomes increasingly manifest that Satan *does not understand* the true meaning of the words he cited. The reason for this is that he *does not understand* the identity of the One who stands before him. The reason for which the Word was made *flesh* entirely escapes him, so much so that he is gradually unmasked. One can approach this reality, which is clearly fundamental insofar as it is the revelation of God's love, only in an indirect way. Cf. C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, especially chapters 18-21.

ing given and received. And, if this definition seems a bit complex, we could simplify it by saying: the original sin begins the moment man *distrusts* God. The image of the Father who loves and who gives is substituted with that of the avaricious, self-serving Master. His promise of life places me in uncertainty; it renders me entirely dependent on him. And if he were to change his mind, if he were to stop giving? Would it not be better if I took into my own hands that which, for the time being, I possess only by receiving it?

Thus, sin is not first the act, which is only the consequence of sin, but a *disfigurement of God*, suggested by the tempter and to which man has consented. In Genesis 3, the tempter begins by destroying the true representation of God by misrepresenting his word (Gn 3:1). The moment this misrepresentation is accepted, the evil is done. The commandment of life appears arbitrary (Gn 3:3), and even wicked (Gn 3:4); and, because the true reality has been lost from sight, *that which does not exist begins to exist* (Gn 3:6). For the desirable character of what we substitute for God is but a construction of our minds. It is God alone who is desirable, and it is for this reason that the rest is good and quite truly belongs to us when we receive it from him.

There Is No Happy Love?

In the original drama, man was "possessed." He was *unhooked* [*décroché*] from God in order to *cling* [*accrocher*] to what is not God. This vocabulary might seem strange. Nevertheless, it corresponds to the vocabulary of Scripture, to a remarkable word which suffices unto itself for a definition of anti-chastity. The Greek word is *harpagmos*.

Everyone knows the Harpagon of Molière. Perhaps fewer people are aware that "Harpagon" evokes in Greek the *harpon*. That is, to be precise, a tool that allows one to cling, to grasp, to seize for oneself, by tearing off if need be, the object of one's desire. Just like the vandals who uproot flowers in a park. Also, just like those who know nothing about grace and who, seeking to capitalize on it, lose what they think they are holding onto, "like those who, seeking to enclose the light, enclose only darkness."⁸

⁸Pascal, *Lettre à madame Périer*, October 1651 (p. 488 in the Pléiade edition).

A *harpagmos* is an object unduly possessed, the fruit of a theft, a plunder; in short, a good poorly acquired, and which therefore never yields profit. From this perspective, every sin is, in essence, a sin against chastity—in its effects, but also in its roots. For chastity, as we might have guessed, bears first of all *on God*. The most radical question is knowing whether the eye we lay upon God is chaste or not. If it is, God can communicate to us, not things, but his own divine condition (moreover, he has *nothing else to give but himself*). If it is not, then what we think we possess no longer amounts to anything, as in the case of the "prodigal" son, whose riches, as things coveted, slip through his fingers like sand the moment they are separated from their source.⁹ Or like the disabused verses of Aragon (in which we will underscore certain characteristic words): "*Rien n'est jamais acquis à l'homme, ni sa force / Ni sa faiblesse, ni son coeur, et quand il croit / Ouvrir ses bras, son ombre est celle d'une croix / Et quand il veut serrer son bonheur, il le broie / Sa vie est un étrange et douloureux divorce / Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux.*"¹⁰

"There is no happy love" in this context means "There is no *chaste* love," no love that lacks any stench of the desire to take and, having taken, to destroy. An observation frightening in its lucidity. A false observation, one will say, in its very exaggeration. And one will be right in saying so. But where is there a totally pure love? Who has ever encountered it and lived it to its end?

The Refusal to Grasp: The Condition for the Fulfillment of the Promise

The hymn of chapter two of the letter to the Philippians tells us of such a love. It was lived in a human way by a divine Person, and its chastity is radical: it bears, as we will show, on divinity itself.¹¹ "Jesus Christ, who was in the condition of God, did not deem equality with God *something to be*

⁹For this reason, *absolutely nothing* of what has not been informed by charity can pass into eternal life. Outside of charity, there is nothing but anti-being (which, though we cannot do so here, must be rigorously distinguished from non-being).

¹⁰"Nothing is ever *secured* to man, neither his strength / Nor his weakness, nor his heart, and when he thinks / That he's opened his arms, his shadow forms a cross / And when he seeks to clasp his happiness, he *shatters* it / His life is a strange and painful divorce / There is no happy love."

¹¹There is nothing surprising in this: the original temptation is worded thus: "you will be like gods" (Gn 3:5).

grasped at (*harpagmos*). But he *emptied himself* and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (2:5-8). The Person of the Son, who did not know "original sin," thus knew the *original* temptation humanly, and victoriously overcame it. The fact that he did not know "the temptations of the flesh and of the world" is thus proof of this initial victory. Affirming this fact is essential to our faith in Christ the redeemer.

But, one might ask, why the two temptations that follow? There is no univocal response to this question. Nevertheless, we can observe that the evangelists Matthew and Luke present them in a different order, as if the order held little significance, while it is essential that the first temptation stand at the head. We can also observe, moreover, that this same temptation recurs at the end of the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is on the cross: "If you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross!" (27:40,42-43). At the end of the forty days in the desert, Jesus "was hungry"—let us translate this: he was at the point of starving to death. He found himself before the perspective of his coming death, and before the following dilemma: *either* continue to adhere to the promise of the Father to bring him to life, *or* cease to adhere to it and give life to himself. The same will occur on the cross, with the "twelve legions of angels" who do not come and who will come no longer. The Father's promise of life thus becomes a hope against hope: a promise of life beyond death. At the pitch of dereliction, in the situation of the sinner, Jesus the innocent one adheres to this promise with his whole being. It is manifest in his prayer. Jesus dies praying, with all that the fact of praying implies (prayer presupposes chastity because it is an attitude of hope); and it is for this reason that he is resurrected.¹²

¹²While the accounts of the Evangelists concerning Jesus' last words diverge over the details, . . . they are all in agreement in the fact that the very death of Jesus was an act of prayer and that this death was his passage to the Father. In the end, they all agree that he prayed with Scripture and that Scripture became flesh in him, that is, became a real passion, the suffering of the just one. They are therefore unanimous in considering that he *inserted his death into the word of God*. . . . Death, which is by its nature a cessation, a rupture of all relation, finds itself transformed by him into an act of self-communication" (J. Ratzinger, *Le Ressuscité: Retraite au Vatican*, [Paris: 1986], 116-18).

"In the days of his flesh, he offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to God who was able to save him from death; and he was heard for his godly fear" (Heb 5:7). Was he really heard, if, in spite of everything, he died? He was heard beyond death, and he brought death to death.

Chastity is not charity; but, insofar as it is a refusal to grasp and an indefectible adherence to Him who gives, it forms its necessary condition. That is why the sign of chastity is the same as that of love: the *eis telos* (John 13:1), the "to the extreme," the fact of leaning upon God even in the case where he withdraws himself; the fact of renouncing all human fecundity in order that God's fecundity be manifest without mediation. A chaste life is thus a given life. "You must give over your life as you would toss a flower," Madeleine Daniélou said to her "daughters" of the apostolic Community of Saint Francis Xavier. For "the grass dries up and the flower wilts, but the Word of our God abides forever" (Is 40:7-8; 1 Pt 1:24).*—Translated by David Louis Schindler, Jr. □

*Jean-Pierre Batut is professor of dogmatic theology at the Seminary of Paris.