

## The Supreme Test

*“And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.”* (Mk 13, 13)

*“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.”* (2 Tim 4, 3-4)

In his retreat talks and conferences the Servant of God Archbishop Fulton Sheen would often speak on the theme of “testing” as an indispensable part of Christian discipleship. He would remind his listeners of how God has tested us throughout Salvation History. The angels were tested. Adam and Eve were tested. Abraham and the Patriarchs were tested. Moses was tested. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself was tested. We today are being tested. Why the centrality of testing? It proves our love for God.

Almighty God could have created us already programmed, like a computer, not to disobey Him. But God created us in His image and likeness which means that He will permit us to choose for Him or against Him. Love cannot be programmed or forced: it must be freely given. God wants us to freely give our love to Him. So much does he respect the Divine image in us that He will even permit us to freely choose to reject Him. In order to understand the importance of testing in the Christian economy, we need to go back to the very dawn of creation: the creation and testing of the angels.

After God created the angels, He tested their fidelity to Him before admitting them to the Beatific Vision, the sight of His very essence. Some angels obeyed the divine test, others did not. Those who disobeyed were irreversibly transformed into demons and cast out of heaven. Those who rebelled saw God no longer as a good — as the Good — but as the oppressor of their freedom. What constituted this rebellion?

St. Thomas Aquinas said that Lucifer, highest of all the angels, desired to be like God and to participate in His beatitude, not through a gift of grace, but rather by taking it with his own natural power. Jealous of God, Lucifer – now Satan – wanted to obtain the splendor of divinity, not receiving it with submissive humility, but stealing it with presumptuous pride. His sin was longing to have and possess more. Therefore, it was primarily a sin of pride by which Satan, and those angels who followed him, transformed themselves into demons. Given their spiritual nature the time of the test lasted only an instant, in which the angel, a pure spirit, made an irrevocable and immutable decision. Having made this choice with perfect comprehension and absolute freedom, the time of the test ended, and the angels remain ever adhering to the choice they have made. The good angels, having adhered irremovably to the good are confirmed in it, while the bad angels, having sinned, remain obstinate in evil. Demons have definitively decided on a destiny far from God. The interior loneliness in which they find themselves forever, their envy of the faithful who enjoy the Beatific Vision, continually bring them face-to-face with their sins. They hate God, themselves, and all those who seek to serve God. Cast out of heaven for all eternity, they sought to destroy the pinnacle of God’s creation: Man.

Adam and Eve, our first parents, like the angels, would be tested to prove their love for God. Satan offered them the prospect of being gods themselves. *“But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it (the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil) your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’* The phrase, “knowing good and evil” in Hebrew means to **determine good and evil**. Thus Satan induced Adam and Eve to replicate his own sin against God: the sin of pride. They, not God, would determine good and evil. Instead of living in

submissive humility, Satan invites them to live in arrogant pride based on their “lived experience.” We have been paying the price for that ever since. Fortunately the story doesn’t end there.

The victory of Jesus Christ over Satan constitutes the very essence of the Gospel. By His victory over our ancient adversary, Christ gives us the weapons through His Church to be victorious in our time of testing. God permits us to be tested because without it we cannot grow in the spiritual life. If all we experienced in life were consolations, there would be no spiritual growth. He Himself experienced death on the cross to save us and told us that unless, “*we take up our cross and follow Him*”, we cannot be His disciples and inherit everlasting life.

In our present time it can be argued that we are perhaps experiencing the “Supreme Test.” Our very religious freedom is threatened as evil is now manifesting itself openly. This has come about not simply through persecution by the Church’s enemies, but because so many of Her sons and daughters have turned against Her. The word for this is **apostasy**. In the dictionary apostasy is defined as “*Abandonment of a former allegiance, as to one’s religious faith.*” Why have they turned against the Church? For the same reasons that the bad angels rebelled against God and Adam and Eve disobeyed God: they want to be their own gods. Like the bad angels they see God and His Church as “*the enemies of their freedom.*” In truth they have embraced an “alternative faith” while still claiming to be “faithful Catholics.” In this alternative faith the individual alone determines his own morality. In effect, he is his own God. There are no objective transcendental truths outside of his own consciousness. One person suggested that the Church may be losing adults, because the younger generation tends to be more socially liberal—more inclusive than the Catholic hierarchy — and are finding “churches with their views.” There’s a word for that: it’s called “self-worship.” (Note: the term “lived experience” is code language for personal self-divinity and self-worship).

The Servant of God Fr. John Hardon SJ well described our present reality with the following:

*“In my opinion the capital sin of the present age is self-idolatry. Men and women are so lost in their personal or collective accomplishments that they are literally, though we don’t use the words, they are literally adoring themselves. Their malady then is more serious than just not asking God for His assistance. It is the deeper vice of ignoring the majesty of God and worshipping instead the pathetically finite misery of man: human beings standing in judgment on the most sacred laws of the Almighty. He tells them to honor father and mother and all legitimate superiors in society. **They tell Him that they determine who has authority, how and even what authority means, and not He.** He tells them not to commit adultery or fornication, or homosexuality. **They tell Him to mind His own divine business. They are not children anymore, as were the simple believers of a former age, to be told how to enjoy their own bodies.** He tells them not to shed innocent human blood. **They tell him that they are the masters of life and death, and not He. It is not for Him but for them to decide who shall live before birth or after birth, and for how long.**”*

Fr. Hardon’s quote best sums up our current situation: the “what” and the “why”. Many Catholics, particularly in the Western world have the above as their real “faith” and not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So the battle lines are drawn: we have to choose. Archbishop Sheen would always say that “*we are being tested in relation to the world.*” This present testing is much like a crucible. It will either purify us or destroy us. We should not underestimate the seriousness of our situation. History has demonstrated that what is happening to the Catholic Church in the West today is usually the presage to more intense persecution to come. But we must never lose hope. As some noted Catholics have said repeatedly, maybe the Church could use a little “good old-fashioned persecution.” In our present situation, we clearly see the sheep being separated from the goats.

So let us gird ourselves to face this “Supreme Test” knowing that eternity is at stake and remember the words of Our Savior: “*Take courage! I have overcome the world.*” ✠