I. Introduction

Siena is a small town in Italy, and St. Catherine of Siena, who lived in the 14th century, had, even as a child, a profound love for Jesus and an intense yearning to be spiritually united with Him, a desire she expressed by constant acts of penance and self-denial. By the age of 19, she was already far advanced in holiness, so the devil attempted to use her strength against her: he slyly suggested her many acts of penance were unnecessary for someone as holy as her, and in fact were actually offensive to God. Pretending sympathy, the Evil One said, “Poor Catherine, why do you torment yourself? What is the use of all the pain you inflict upon yourself? Why don’t you sleep like other people? Why don’t you eat and drink—in moderation, of course? . . . Live like other women; get a good and nice-looking husband, have children, become a happy wife and mother.” (Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these things in and of themselves, but Catherine knew they would be wrong for her because she had a different calling from God.) When Catherine ignored this innocent-sounding temptation, the devil then changed his tactics and caused her room to be filled with sensual images and visions; she could no longer see her crucifix, nor could she shut her eyes and ears to the demands that she give in to the desires of the flesh; Satan warned her that these temptations would leave her no peace for the rest of her life—unless she gave into them. The saint cried aloud in defiance, “Even if my Creator would condemn me in the end, I will not for one instant cease serving Him. Of myself, I can do nothing, but I trust in Our Lord Jesus Christ.” Catherine kept repeating the Name of Jesus again and again, forcing Satan to flee and shattering the images which he used to assault her peace of mind.

Once this severe trial was over, St. Catherine complained to her Lord, “Where were You, O good and sweet Jesus, when my soul was being so severely tormented?” From the crucifix, the Lord spoke to her: “I was in your heart, for I will not leave anyone who does not first leave Me.” Jesus assured Catherine that even though His crucified image had disappeared momentarily from her sight, it was His presence in her soul that allowed her to overcome the devil’s attack, and then told her, “When at last you offered, of your own free will, to bear all the temptations and the torments and even eternal loss, rather than cease from serving Me, [all this temptation was] taken from you.”

Even though we’re unlikely ever to be assaulted as directly and severely as was St. Catherine of Siena, this instance from her life contains several important lessons for us. First, the devil is capable of using several different approaches against us, including flattery, pretended sympathy, and even brute spiritual force. Second, on our own, we have no hope of resisting him; even someone as spiritually great as St. Catherine was pushed to her breaking point. Third, and most important, Jesus never abandons those who, in spite of everything, continue trusting in Him—and this means that self-surrender is the key to spiritual victory. The more we entrust ourselves into the hands of Jesus, the greater will be our share in His triumph over sin and death.
II. Development

The readings chosen by the Church for this First Sunday of Lent are almost a summary of the story of salvation. The passage from the Book of Genesis describes the original sin: the deliberate disobedience of the first man and woman, following the cunning temptation of the serpent. However, all was not lost; St. Paul tells us in the Letter to the Romans that though sin entered the world through the disobedience of one man—namely, Adam—salvation entered the world through the obedience of Jesus, through Whom sinners can be made righteous and worthy of everlasting life. Though eternally divine, Jesus is also fully human—meaning He was subject to temptation, just like the rest of us. However, the Gospel shows us very clearly that He would not deviate in even the slightest degree from the will of His Heavenly Father, thereby defeating every assault of the devil. This is the point at which the story of salvation involves us personally: we too are called to use God’s grace to resist every temptation and unholy desire; if we make this effort, relying on the Lord’s strength instead of our own, our success is assured.

III. Conclusion

St. Catherine of Siena learned to trust completely in Jesus, and so the next time she was threatened and assaulted by Satan and his evil spirits, she told them, “I have made the choice of suffering as the wellspring of my strength. It is no hardship for me, but rather a delight to endure for my Savior’s sake all [that] you have been inflicting on me . . . for as long as it shall please His Majesty.” That’s the secret to defeating the devil’s attacks: we must offer them up for the honor of our Savior. In fact, we can overcome and even stop any demonic attack or temptation in its tracks by simply praying aloud, “I offer this up for the glory of God.” Since glorifying God is the last thing Satan ever wants to do, a simple prayer like this completely turns the tables on him and forces him to leave us in peace. Some of saints, including the holy French priest St. John Vianney, have suggested that resisting temptation is a wonderful opportunity to exercise our souls, grow in virtue, and become spiritually stronger. Obviously this doesn’t mean we should go looking for spiritual trouble or temptation, but when these things come, we must remind ourselves that we can prevail with God’s help, coming closer to Him in the process. Also, we must always remember that when we fail, we are never to wallow in guilt or shame; rather, Jesus wants us to trust in His mercy, turn back to Him, ask His forgiveness, learn from our failure, and move forward in faith—all the while being willing to extend this same mercy and understanding toward those who sin against us.

These six weeks of Lent are a time for us to acknowledge our sinfulness, to become more aware of the strategy and tactics the devil uses against us, and to experience ever more deeply the immensity of Christ’s loving mercy. Except for the Virgin Mary, none of the saints were free from sin, but all of them lived in a spirit of repentance, learned from their failures, and used their experiences of temptation as an opportunity to grow in holiness. If we, even in small and humble ways, try to imitate this example, these forty days will prove to be an important stage in our own journey to eternal life.