

Lenten Reflection  
26 February 2007  
Holy Apostles Chapel

*“The Spirit led Jesus into the desert.”*

Each year the Spirit leads the Church, each one of us united to those in communion with the Holy Spirit, into the Lenten desert. This season of grace prepares us to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s Passion, Death, and glorious Resurrection during the Sacred Triduum. The desert is a biblical theme running throughout the Old Testament as a place of encounter with God: Moses before the burning bush; the people of Israel for forty years; the prophet Hosea, to name a few. Jesus fulfills the purpose of the desert-experience perfectly. He encounters Satan, the enemy of God and man, whose temptations are met with the sword of the Word of God and are dashed to pieces.

The desert is both a place of beauty and a deadly place. The sky and landscape in the desert can be breathtaking. The dry and barren terrain where very little can live awakens when the rains fall at certain times of year with beautiful flowers and plants springing forth from the seemingly sterile ground. The desert is home to dangerous conditions and inhabitants. The heat and lack of water can mean certain death. An encounter with a snake, scorpion or wild animal can have serious, life-threatening consequences. The harshness of the desert is also its beauty: its simplicity, its uncluttered and basic components speak to us of an inner reality that helps us to encounter God.

The desert has been throughout the history of the Church the place where men and women went to consecrate themselves to God. Some went to the actual, physical location. Men like Saint Anthony of the Desert, Saint Pachomius, John Cassian to name a few have left a record of the desert spirituality that countless people live today throughout the world. Whether in the desert of a Carmelite enclosure or a Carthusian mountainside, the desert of a simple hermitage, or even in the midst of the desert of the city, the search for God and the consecration to Him can be found.

There are three deserts that I would like to consider in today’s meditation: the desert of the world; the desert of the human heart; and the desert of Our Lord’s Presence in the Blessed Sacrament. These deserts, in this progression, reveal to us a deepening of the biblical experience of sin and grace, light and darkness, Presence and absence.

The desert of the world is the exterior battleground between God and Satan. The world, understood in its biblical sense, as man alienated from God as in Saint John’s Gospel and Letters, is the domain of the Evil One until Christ returns and renews all things in Himself once and for all, conquering the reign of sin. The contemporary world, the secular city, so-called, has all the emptiness, barrenness and danger that the actual desert contains. The numerous occasions of temptation, the stale air of agnosticism, materialism and hedonism choke the spirit and darken our minds. In this desert pleasure cut off from its God-given purpose does not fulfill but only becomes a greater source of pain, inner anguish, loneliness and alienation.

And yet—this is also the place where the grace of God can meet the emptiness and meaninglessness of men and women if we, as believers in Christ, are willing to be present in word and deed, in works of love. Rather than condemning this world, our Lord sent His Apostles and disciples into its very midst. The message of the Gospel is addressed directly to all who seek and cannot find the ultimate meaning of life in the world without God. “Repent and believe” are the first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Mark. The desert of the world is the place of the New Evangelization, where even those familiar with Christ and His Message must be converted anew, challenged and called forth to receive His life-giving Word.

The desert of the human heart is the painful experience of conflict, lack of fulfillment, weakness, and struggle. The human heart, the very essence and identity of man, is wounded by the effects of original sin and personal sin. The desires that flow from the deepest part of the human heart, while good because they were placed there by God are distorted and inordinate: the desire to love and be loved, to have, to know, hunger and thirst, to be autonomous, free, to be powerful. The three temptations that Satan proposes to Jesus reflect the hold that he has on unredeemed man: the God-man refuses all three in reparation for Adam’s original fall from grace and in order to be an example to each one of us how to resist temptation. Further, as Saint Augustine taught, Christ in His sacred Humanity ‘made us one with Him.’ He exhorts us, ‘See yourself as tempted in him, and see yourself as victorious in him.’ The desert of the heart can turn us toward God if we surrender our hold upon what we think ‘is ours’ and acknowledge God’s rights over our bodies, our minds, our wills. Although the Devil can entice our imaginations with tempting pleasures that are wrong, he cannot enter in our souls to read our hearts. Only God is the One who can enter within the sanctuary of our hearts. The Evil One can know by our exterior behavior or from our past sins what could tempt us. But he has limitations placed upon him by God as a creature to what he can do to us.

The human heart is a dangerous place if we enter within ourselves unaided by grace. Fortified and directed by the Word of God we can know ourselves as God know us and enter the spiritual battle between light and darkness with the strength provided by Jesus in His desert temptations. We cannot, must not, trust ourselves but entrust ourselves to the prayers of the Mother of God, Saint Joseph “Terror of the Demons” and Saint Michael the Archangel when we strive to battle evil within. We are never alone in our struggle against evil—the communion of saints in heaven and the communion of those in grace on earth provide spiritual comfort and power.

The desert of our Lord’s Eucharistic Presence is the silent, mysterious, invisible reality we encounter in the Holy Mass, in visits to the Tabernacle, and before the Sacred Host in the monstrance. Jesus reveals Himself ‘in the breaking of the bread’ while at the same time concealing Himself. In the *Tantum ergo* we sing, “What our senses fail to fathom Let us grasp with faith’s consent.” The deprivation of our senses before our Lord in the Holy Eucharist is a ‘desert experience’. We are stripped to an encounter in faith. It is not enough to say: “I believe” with our mind; our hearts must encounter Him with belief, as well. With Saint Thomas we cry within our hearts at the Elevation of the Host, “My Lord and my God!” We receive the Holy Eucharist as spiritual food and drink; we adore the

Lord in the monstrance—a word which literally means ‘to show’. As the sacred Humanity of our Lord during His thirty-three years before His Ascension was the ‘veil’ of His Divinity to those who encountered Him, so the appearances of bread and wine are the ‘veil’ that hide His Eucharistic Presence. Yet this ‘veil’ allows Him to come to us, to enter with us, to remain with us in order to transform us into Himself. As there are many deprivations within the physical desert, so we see connections with the deprivation of our senses before Christ in the Eucharist. This deprivation is to serve as an atmosphere of deeper, more interior faith and greater love. The silence of the Tabernacle, the silence in adoration before the monstrance is a means of Jesus expressing Himself to us in a more profound way. Silence is the language of lovers. The silence of the Incarnation at the consent of our Lady at the Annunciation, the silence of John the Baptist leaping in his mother’s womb in the encounter with the unborn Jesus in His Mother’s womb, the silence of Calvary with Mary and John beneath the Cross, the silence of the moment of the Resurrection—all this and much more are made present in the Eucharistic Presence. Although a desert to our senses, this silence is a veritable garden blooming in the desert, and explosion of glory right in our midst.

“The Spirit led Jesus into the desert.” We are lead into the desert with Jesus if we enter into the battle that He has won for us confident in His power and willing to undergo the deprivations of the desert, whether in the world, the heart or His Eucharistic Presence, “our pledge of future glory.”