

A Lenten Reflection

by Archbishop John C. Wester



During the first week of January, we bishops of Region XIII make our annual retreat at the Redemptorist Retreat House near Tucson, AZ. The retreat house is in the northern part of the Sonora Desert, nestled near the famous Picture Rocks, so-called for the ancient hieroglyphics that can be found on them. Each day of the retreat, I enjoyed taking a walk into the desert, which was at once beautiful and ominous. The saguaro cactus was abundant along with many other desert flora and fauna. I half expected to see Snoopy's brother Spike leaning against one of the cacti as he napped! But the desert is nothing to joke about. It can be a very dangerous place if one is not careful. In the desert, life is stripped of the essentials and survival becomes the priority. There are no conveniences, no roads, no support systems. It is just you and raw nature, alone in the elements, keenly aware of an opportunity to bask in its beauty and the danger of succumbing to its brutality.

Perhaps this is why Jesus went into the desert to begin His public ministry. He knew He would not be distracted there with the tugs and pulls of daily life. In the desert, Jesus would be alone, truly alone, and He could hear more clearly the voice of His Father calling Him to do his will. In the desert, Jesus confirmed His decision to do the will of His Father as He began a ministry that would eventually lead to His death and resurrection and our redemption. The desert provided Jesus with the venue He needed to make sure He was on the right path, even if it was a path fraught with peril and suffering. Of course, this path does not end with the cross but with the resurrection: no cross, no resurrection. It was in the desert that Jesus gathered the strength and the grace He needed to move forward in fulfilling the will of His Father for Him and for all of us.

During those 40 days and nights, Jesus emptied Himself so He could experience anew the love of His Father, the only gift that would truly satiate Him.

No wonder, then, that the Church calls you and me to enter the desert of Lent that we also might confirm our desire to do the will of God in our lives. It is in the Lenten desert that we can strip away the superfluous and the unnecessary and do battle with our temptation to make ourselves the center of the universe instead of God, thus reestablishing our commitment to follow Christ, no matter the cost. It is in the desert that we will follow the path that leads to the Easter mysteries in which we will celebrate Christ's resurrection and His triumph over sin and death. What does the desert of Lent look like?

Our Lenten desert is comprised of three elements: fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. By fasting, we are reminded that we are hungry for God. By almsgiving, we are reminded that Christ's body, the Church, is hungry for God. By praying, we are reminded that we are hungry for eternal life with God. These Lenten practices put me in touch with my existential poverty, and my journey in the desert reminds me to turn to God, not the world, if I wish to experience the fullness of life.

This Lent, the Church invites us to enter the desert as we place our trust in God's love, aware of God's deep desire to satisfy our longing hearts and souls. The desert can certainly be difficult: it is never easy to stand alone in the presence of an all-knowing, all-powerful God. But Christ reminds us that we are also in the presence of an all-loving God who wants nothing more than to fill us with His undying love. We enter the desert of Lent to become poor so that God can make us rich in His love and grace. I encourage us all to provide more time in our day for prayer, reflecting on Christ's passion and death so that we will be prepared to celebrate His victory over the grave. I also encourage us to connect our fasting with our almsgiving. Fasting is far more efficacious if it serves as a reminder to reach out to others in need, not out of charity, but because I, who am poor, give to my brother or sister who is poor. Such "charity" reminds me that there are many ways to be poor and that in God's presence, we are all poor in one way or another.

As you and I prepare for our Lenten journey, our Lenten retreat in the desert, remember the words of Hosea 2:14: "But then I will win her back once again. I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her there." Christ is waiting for you in the desert – may you have a blessed journey.