



The Desert

The desert helps me establish my own identity. "He who brings himself to naught discovers who he is." The desert helps me to strip away many supports that can distract me from my true self and cause me to have an inflated or deflated view of myself that is not rock bottom honesty. The desert might help me discover I have greater stature than I thought or it might deflate me to my proper size. The desert helps me to come to the truth about myself. If I live only in community I can begin to live off community, fade into the composite, become a wallflower or parasite, lose my individuality. The desert creates solitude, the basic component of community.

The devil said to Jesus: "We are Legion" or as one translation has it: "We are mob". There was loss of identity and, as a consequence, confusion, pain, bewilderment, panic. Hell is loss of identity, loss of individuality, hell is being quite literally a lost soul.

The desert can help me discover the primary colors that make up my life and contribute to the glory of community. Not only do I discover my own true worth in the desert but also the worth of community. I can appreciate more sharply many taken-for-granted attitudes that a community freely bestows on me when I am away from the community. At the same time I begin to appreciate some of my own splendor as I dip myself into the primary colors of God's presence in the desert. I become more bright, more colorful because of this fundamental encounter. I have something unique to contribute to the community because I have spent time in the desert waste.

The desert does not really separate my heart from community. The desert dweller applies to the community the words that Jesus said to His disciples about His departure; "That where I am you also may be." In this desert I meet God in a unique way. I must be alone to do this. Yet though I am alone I wish community could be with me to experience the Lord as I do. I cannot have both literally at the same time but because I carry you in my heart I will share this with you in deed, word, attitude, service when I return to your midst.

The desert can bloom or the desert can burn, whatever the Lord wishes. Either way I will come to a better perspective of life, of community, of myself. God may combine blooming and burning in one desert experience, whatever He wishes. The desert is mystery. The desert is something to which I surrender. The desert is the unique experience of the providence of God. The desert at once takes me away from the complexities of society while at the same time making it possible for me to enter more deeply into the mystery of God and life. The desert will simplify life but not make life simplistic. The desert will increase my capacity to discover mystery not only in the time in the desert but in the return to community.

The desert can destroy me. I can succumb to the temptations it offers. I can grow possessive, greedy, presumptuous in the desert. I can become isolated in the desert instead of experiencing solitude I can become an escapist in the desert. I can return to society but never



really leave the desert.

Although the desert has its temptations and destructive forces they are harmful only so long as I abandon the word of God. It was in the desert that Jesus used the Scripture to defeat every argument of the devil. It was in the desert that Jesus demonstrated that not on bread alone does man live but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. The desert should make the word of God a delight and a defense for the one who dares to dwell in its austerity. If I enter the desert with this word of God in my heart, in my memory, before my eyes, on my lips then the desert will bear fruit in my life no matter how hungry, tired, forlorn I might feel for the moment. Angels will minister to me in whatever form or time the Lord wishes.

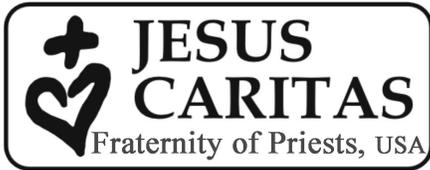
The desert can produce mirages or a startling clarity. The desert demands discernment for a mirage can have a clarity to it that is empty. The desert tests truth. In the desert I can discover the deceit in some long-standing temptation that may have been haunting me for days and weeks. However the desert can also add to the mirage of the temptation as it suggests its own rationalizations and justifications to deceive me. I need to bring the word of God with me into the desert or else I can be buffeted or deceived by the Evil One. With the Word of God to support me of heart, the desert will enable me to see at great distances with unusual clarity that will inspire me to know the true goals of life, that will help me appreciate the real splendor of the kingdom, that will expose the shallowness and thinness and perversity.

The word of God in the desert helps me also to see close range, indeed into my very soul and there discover the intimacy I can enjoy with the Lord, the completeness I have in my life in the Trinity and the Trinity in me. This discovery protects me from a neurotic search for intimacy that leads to indulgence rather than love. At the same time this appreciation of my own unique fullness graces me to have joyful and responsible intimacy with my fellow believers.

I do not seek the desert to become tough or renowned as singular. I seek the desert that I might enjoy more fully, freely, distinctly the bread of God's word.

When I live by God's word I experience the Paschal mystery. In the desert I die to the comforts of the palace, of civilization so that I rise to pure experience of the Lord's strength, His wisdom, His comfort. The desert is surrender to the Lord. I do not conquer the desert. The desert conquers me- I do not dictate terms to the desert. I accept the terms that the desert presents. Though Mary Magdalene was physically in a garden her heart was in a desert of sorrow and yearning and pining when she discovered Jesus. The desert helps me yearn and pine for the Lord: The desert stretches me, enlarges me by the yearning it generates. If I live a life of indulgence quite the contrary happens. I grow smaller, my concentration becomes narrower, my expectations become more petty. I do not know deep sighing, deep longing. I live on the surface, in the immediate, only skin deep in tastes and values. I become scattered and distracted by the trivia that is exaggerated. I lose a purity of heart, a singleness of purpose. I am eventually destroyed by the ants and insects of life.

In an affluent society the desert becomes an oasis. It is the rare occurrence. It is hard to find.



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The desert saves us from the engulfment by "too much, too often, too long." I need the desert to find life.

The desert forces confrontation with ultimate realities, wild beasts and angels, Jesus and the Evil One. The desert is not for the timid, the unprepared.

I enter the desert at the call of God. I should be led by the Spirit. I do not rashly, thoughtlessly, presumptuously enter the desert. He who takes the initiative to invite me into the desert will also make it fruitful.

In practical terms God will call me to desert periods when I discern the rhythms of life and detect with the help of the Church the moments of entry, the length of the stay. The desert can be an empty room, a chapel, a countryside. It is a call to silence, aloneness, waiting, endurance. It is willingness to bring myself to naught. It is imitation of Jesus.

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