

THE TRIAL OF THE DESERT

From “Abiding in God”

by

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When God chooses a man to entrust him with a mission, he starts by making him his friend and his confidant. Very naturally, he takes him aside to murmur his secrets to him, for God does not speak in noise: I will now allure (him), and bring (him) into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to (him) (Hos 2:19). He acts in this way with Moses, Elijah, Hosea, John the Baptist; and Jesus himself spends forty days in the desert before he proclaims the Kingdom of God. In the Bible, every dispatch to a mission is generally preceded by a retreat in the desert.

We may wonder why God prefers to choose the desert, an arid, harsh, inhospitable place. In fact, the profound reason of the prophet's time spent in the desert is determined by the very nature of his mission and the intimacy God wants to have with him. The prophet is always tempted to view his mission on the level of human relationships or of immediate effectiveness. When God entrusts him with a responsibility, man is tempted to see if it has any chance of succeeding and, for that, he adjusts his personal qualities to the resources of his relationships. In fact, he has not yet assessed the stakes of the mission that God is entrusting to him.

Let us watch Moses calculating his chances of succeeding with Pharaoh in spite of his clumsy tongue. See Elijah, the prophet entrusted with formidable missions, who trembles and loses heart before the fury of Ahab and Jezebel. And when God chooses and sends Jeremiah as the prophet of nations, the latter cries out: Ah, Loin' God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy (Jer 1:6). It is the same for Jonah who is sent to Nineveh to preach conversion; he thinks he is too weak and the city too large for him to be able to fulfil his mission.

There is a radical disproportion between the scope of the prophet's task and the feebleness of his means. Still today, the apostle experiences this disproportion. Placed before a world that sets wealth, pleasure and power on the top level of his concerns, he must preach poverty, self-denial and humility. Moreover, he urges men to enter into a relationship with a God who is beyond their grasp through

the senses, whereas everything in and around them incites them to a tangible experience. Think of the educators who must proclaim Christ to young people who are continually solicited by the images and sensations of a materialized world.

It is normal that the prophet would lose heart before these mountains of unbelief, egotism, and lust. He sits under a broom tree and says with the prophet Elijah: It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors (1 Kings 19:4). Elijah is at the end of his strength, he is discouraged, for the people reject his preaching. He finds himself miserable and poor before God. We are often in a situation similar to the one Elijah faced. We are at the end of our courage, strength, light and love to keep on praying and proclaiming Jesus Christ to our brothers who no longer seem to hunger for him.

It is precisely at the moment when everything seems to crumble around us, when the situation appears irremediably lost that God takes us through the desert like the prophet Elijah. God then wants to make him understand that the dynamism of his action does not depend on his own human resources, but on divine power. We do not build the Kingdom solely with human virtues, but with the dynamism of the Spirit.

Here we are before a fundamental law of the spiritual world: to work effectively for the Kingdom of God, we must be and acknowledge ourselves to be devoid of all riches. God will deign to use Elijah to fulfill his plan of love when the prophet acknowledges that he is poor and has experienced the limitations of his human possibilities. God is jealous of his high exploits. Either he brings them about by himself, or he uses instruments that are humanly unsuitable and unable to assume any of the glory. They hand it over to him entirely in a virginal way. Poverty is one of the radical laws of the supernatural world (cf. I Cor 1: 27-29).

Purifications of the Desert

It is precisely in the desert that the prophet will experience his limitations and his poverty before he receives the revelation of God's, meekness. Until then, human gifts and grace coincided in the apostle to make his action exciting and easy, but the latter remained too human. Without noticing this too well, his intentions were mixed and, while working at the building of the Kingdom, he was also building his own work. Many returns on ourselves and self-complacency weigh

down and warp our apparently pure intentions. It is not a matter of ill will on the part of the apostle, but a secret disposition of which he is not even aware.

By calling him to the desert, God will reveal this secret sin by attacking it directly at its roots. The great virtue of the desert lies in solitude and silence. In the desert, the prophet can no longer rely on others' approval. In current life he could play a role, make himself worthy in the eyes of others, be the object of esteem and consideration. In the desert, he can no longer play a role, for man is placed there before his own harsh reality. In the desert, we can no longer find an escape, either we lose ourselves completely in God, or we do some self-seeking and it is then the solitude of hell. God's silence is still a way for him to reveal himself to us, since we are then forced to seek him in pure faith. On some days, silence weighs us down so much that like St. Teresa of Avila, we would like to leave him to do just anything; this would be cowardice and an escape before God and ourselves.

When he enters into the desert, Elijah leaves his servant at Beersheba and must make a day's journey through the wilderness of Judah. He must go through the desert of purifications to know the loftiest and most intimate relationships with God. He then experiences the temptation of weariness and discouragement: *He asked that he might die* (1 Kings 19:4).

The desert deprives us not only of the presence of others, but it forces us as well to die to ourselves and to unmask our heart of stone. Like Moses, we must remove our sandals (Ex 3:5) and walk barefoot risking to be burned by the sand or bitten by a scorpion. Patiently and through the years, we have fashioned sandals for ourselves thanks to which we have been able to walk without injuring ourselves on the rocks of the road. We are experts in the art of protecting ourselves from God. A little at a time, we have fine-tuned a whole subtle system of defence and protection to avoid being burned by the flames of the burning bush.

In the desert, the order is exact. We must remove our sandals and abandon all the tricks that protected us from God's ardour. The isolating wall of protection must be torn down so that we may receive the burning revelation of God. Our heart of stone has secreted gradually a gangue that isolated it from the fusion of the Holy Spirit. This shell must be broken away so that the love of God may fill us.

It is normal that this process of purification and decantation take place in pain. Acid cannot hollow out limestone without eroding and grating it. It is always humiliating and difficult to acknowledge that we are destitute before God. This is when our eyes open not only to our misery, but to the richness and the splendour of God who wants to clothe us with his beauty and love. The divine fire fills us so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life (2 Cor 5:4). While piercing the heart of the prophet, the flame of love comforts, sears and heals him.

Detachment in Prayer

The silence of the desert surrounds the sensibility, the memory and the imagination. Prayer no longer finds any support in these areas. Pure faith alone triumphs, and faith then appears harsh, dark and bare. Until then our prayer could remain linked to the whims of attraction, it fed on contacts with others. We must admit that it followed the rhythm of our depressions and enthusiasms. Now we must go to God in naked faith.

"You must strip your prayer," the novice master tells me. *"You must simplify, deintellectualize. Place yourself before Jesus like a pauper. Let go your ideas, come with your living faith. Still yourself before the Father in an act of love. Do not attempt to reach God with the intelligence, you will never succeed; reach him in love, that alone is possible"* (Carlo CARRETTO, *Lettres du desert*, p. 21).

The desert teaches us to prolong silent prayer. In daily life, we cannot always devote long periods of time to prayer, for work monopolizes us. Moreover, we are experts in the art of finding excuses pleading the lack of time or of availability. In the desert, we have nothing else to do except to pray and that helps to restore the tissues of our heart. Indeed, devoting several brief moments to mental prayer each day is not the same as to commit ourselves to prayer for an hour or more.

When we pray for a quarter of an hour or for a half-hour, we easily manage to fill the time with ideas drawn from a book, with feelings or with a prayer of petition. But when prayer is prolonged, we go down into our own innermost depths and the Holy Spirit makes us aware of our poverty. We are soon dried up and we can no longer manage to pray. *"In prayer, we must reach, as it were, a certain limit of our own, of our possibilities, in order to be in a position to offer ourselves to this action of the Holy Spirit that nothing else can replace"* (R. VOILLAUME, *Retraite au Vatican*, p. 88).

Little by little, our mind is pacified. Fasting makes the body supple and the senses no longer claim their fodder. This allows prayer to become serious, even if it is painful and arid. The apostle discovers his own reality before God, he learns to see that the apostolate is a power that God displays in the helplessness of man.

Saint James notes that Elijah's experience is our own: Elijah was a human being like us (Jas 5:17). In the desert, we become able to discern the true salvations from the fake ones. In practice we must admit that the salvation of humanity lies in the cross of Christ. God brings about the salvation of the world at the moment when he strips us of everything and makes us like Christ on the cross.

The Cross and the Desert

The apostle must go through the desert to free himself from all claims of saving the world by spectacular means. Like Christ, he must become God's pauper who realizes the redemption of the world by the cross. He will often have to contemplate Christ's forty days in the desert. Like him he will be driven to the desert by the Holy Spirit to be tempted there. When we look at the temptations endured by Jesus in the desert, it seems that Satan suggests that Christ use his gifts to bring about a human and spectacular salvation. Jesus refuses to let himself be imprisoned within these narrow perspectives and deliberately chooses the Passion and death on the cross.

In the combat in the desert, the cross truly appears as Christ's perfect victory over Satan, since it is the perfect dispossession of self and openness to the love of the Father. By refusing to change the stones into bread, Jesus performs the first act that will lead him to death since he prefers the bread of the Father's Word rather than an earthly food. In reality, he wants to save the world by the cross and St. Luke is not mistaken when he notes that Satan abandoned him until the appointed time. And we well know that this time is the agony, that is, Jesus' ultimate struggle to surrender his life to the Father in anguish and distress.

As far as we are concerned, the mystery of the cross in which our apostolic action must flourish is always a reality that is hard to accept. Like Peter, we always want to avoid going up to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Thus, we are confronted with the same temptation as Jesus was in the desert. We are placed before the mystery of the redemption with the cross in the centre and God must give us the understanding of this mystery as a supernatural light.

Only in the desert can we become aware of the ineluctable mystery of the cross. In daily life, we often live in illusion concerning our apostolic activities. Like the prophet, we adjust our possibilities and strengths to the goal pursued because we do not like the cross and it is difficult for us to discover in it the mystery of the Love of God: *"Now, if we are not tempted to refuse such a plan, is it not often because we forget it, we no longer see it? It is really in the moments devoted to the contemplation of the Lord that we become aware of his plan of mercy of which the cross is the centre, of this mysterious failure in weakness, with the whole mystery of suffering. We need solitude and silence so that God may place us before the true plan that our apostolic action must adopt"* (VOILLAUME, op. cit., pp. 10-11).

The Desert of the Middle-Aged

When we say that we must go through the desert to purify our heart and our motives for action, we must not think that this necessarily implies the possibility of going to the Sahara or the desert of Judaea. Not all of us are given the possibility of going to a real desert, but we are all called to go through the desert of our life. From time to time, we must leave our brothers and our activities, seek solitude to restore unity to our lives in silence and prayer. It is up to each one of us to specify the "time in the desert" that is suitable to live with God alone. Without this we will never enter contemplative prayer.

But here we want to speak of another desert, that of the purification of the mind and heart. When God does not have a material desert at hand to put us in, he takes it upon himself to create one around us. It is the daily trials of failing health, our psychological deficiencies, our solitude within a community nonetheless very united. In spiritual life we must expect to go through the desert once or several times, be it only the trial of time and weariness. Monotony of life and daily dullness are often our kind of desert. We must walk forty days and forty nights in land without roads and water. Fortunately, God brings us, as he did to Elijah, the comfort of the Eucharist and he quenches our thirst with the waters of his grace.

In spiritual life, there is always the trial of time that nothing can replace. As a rule, a soul decants itself only very slowly and, like Elijah, it must let itself be led by God without knowing where it is going: *"Where is the man who knows how to be bored? The one who, when he cannot escape boredom by going up, refuses to escape it by*

going down? No trial can have its way with this man. The night of the saints is the boredom suffered without falling from grace" (G Thibon).

It takes a great deal of time for man to understand that his best intentions are tainted in their roots. After a few years of serious commitment to spiritual life, he has come to believe that he is humble, obliging, pure, but he must become aware that pride has invaded his whole being, clown to his deepest roots. His life of prayer, his apostolic activities and his human relationships are intermingled with impurities.

Apart from a few privileged beings who have understood very soon where the combat lay and have not let themselves be deceived by men or Satan and who have committed themselves in the way of poverty, humility and spiritual childhood, most are called to undergo a harsh and painful experience (C. Carretto).

This new entrance into the desert normally takes place at about the age of forty. Man, then goes through an intermediate psychological phase between adulthood and old age and he is upset in all the areas of his person. He experiences boredom, darkness and at greater depths still the vision and experience of sin. Nonetheless, he has given himself totally to God, but he must renew his "yes" while being aware from his own experience that he is a fragile, weak, proud and impure being. He experiences his unlimited misery by going down to his innermost depths.

Even if the grace of God allows him to avoid the experience of sin, he becomes aware of the fact that he is capable of committing it by moving away from God. Then his heart is filled with thanksgiving towards a Father who is so merciful, who has prevented him from falling into the abyss. At the same time, he becomes humble and poor, for he knows that he is vulnerable.

It is the time of the mid-life crisis and also of the second conversion. God makes him go through the desert where he experiences the evilness of his heart: For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways" (Ps 95:10). This is a serious period for man because it will determine his total commitment to holiness. This is the true temptation of the desert where man must go back to his fundamental options in view of offering himself to God.

Beyond the evil deeds, man discovers that he is indwelt by a deeper and more hidden sin. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me (Ps 51:5). This state of sin imbues the inner layers of his being and perverts his best intentions. He senses that in his innermost depths, there are hidden tendencies of which he does not manage to rid himself: sloth, sensuality, cowardice, falsehood and vanity. But his greatest suffering comes from the harshness of his heart. He discovers that his greatest sin is to oppress the Trinitarian Life in his heart of stone. The more intense the life of the Spirit in him, the more it rejuvenates the hardened tissues of his heart aged by sin.

When we are subjected to such a temptation, we are like the people whom Elijah chides in these words: How long will you go limping with two different opinions? (1 Kings 18:21). In fact, we are still divided between the total gift to God and a part we reserve for ourselves, between the "yes" and the "no." We clearly feel that we are playing a comedy and that our words give the lie to our profound attitude. But we also feel unable to come out of this on our own.

That is why this period is decisive for the one who wants to become a spiritual man. His prayer becomes true and strong, for it is a cry rising to God that triggers his mercy. His helplessness is a call to the power of God. Such a prayer cannot remain unanswered. In my distress I called upon the Lord... From his people he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears (Ps 18:6).

So, God intervenes. At the heart of the desert, he sends the support of his Manna, for it would be impossible for man to live in this state of abandonment. But this experience has transformed him in depth; he has become totally humble and he no longer relies on anything but the mercy of God. Alone he can do nothing; with God, he can do everything. Man, then walks on the way of love where there is no longer any fear.