

A RETREAT
IN THE DESERT
WITH JESUS
A LENTEN SURVIVAL KIT

By
Bernard-Marie, O.F.S.

Translated from the French by
Rev. Msgr. C. Anthony Ziccardi, S.S.L., S.T.D.



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INTRODUCTION

Understanding Lent better

The Christian life can be defined as a life of faith, hope, and love with Christ and in His Spirit. The Apostle Paul captured this reality by a single exclamation: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me!" (Gal 2:20)

To live better this divine companionship, the Church invites the faithful to walk in the footsteps of Christ. He understands them better than they do themselves because He has preceded them on the earthly journey. Through all kinds of joyful and sorrowful events, He has blazed for them the trail of salvation on earth and of eternal happiness in the hereafter. Thus, after their baptism, believers are invited to relive, most notably by the liturgical cycle, the great mysteries of the life of their Lord. With Him, this entails being born from above (Jn 3:3) and sharing in His struggle against the evil powers, in His ministry of preaching and consolation for the suffering, and in His sacrifice of love for all humanity by accepting "each day" (Lk 9:23) to carry one's own cross behind Him.

Certainly, the liturgical year is one particularly beautiful and fruitful way to follow Christ in His various mysteries. This time of grace starts with the season of Advent followed closely by Christmas. Then follows the time of preparation for the great Passion and paschal Resurrection. It is the time of Lent or Forty (*quadragesima*), this is to say, the period of forty days during which "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by

the devil" (Mt 4:1). The use of Forty or *Quadragesima* is not accidental. It matches the forty-year trek of the Hebrews in the desert of Sinai towards the Promised Land. This number of forty days begins with Ash Wednesday and goes to Holy Saturday evening, the vigil of Easter, and it does not include any Sunday in this period; for, liturgically, Sundays are always considered a joyous celebration of the victory over evil without prescribed penitential concern. Our countdown of the days takes into account this aspect and concludes with the joyous day of Easter, which is thus envisioned as the first day of the New Time. It has seemed natural to us to conclude our spiritual journey with this day following Lent because it is this day that gives meaning to the rest, that illumines all, that gives the noticeable clarity of eternity and supernatural peace to the period of desert and privation which has preceded it.

How to proceed practically

Our goal here is daily to offer the reader various pathways of reflection in order to facilitate prayer, love, and action in the directions that the Church herself is moving at the same time in her liturgy. We first quote a brief scriptural excerpt from that day's liturgy. It is this biblical passage that establishes the subject for the day as well as its tenor. This is one of the characteristics of this project that determines other aspects of it. The official liturgical translation has the merit of being well suited to public proclamation and to simple understanding of the text, but other translations are not less rich. [In this English translation, we will be quoting primarily from the *New Catholic Bible* which is derived from the Hebrew and Greek texts].

After the Scripture and in line with it, we offer a brief reflection borrowed from the Tradition of the Church, from the early or the more recent Tradition.

After the doctrinal instruction, there follows a short reflection by the author who repeats the theme from a spiritual point of view that may include the perspective of final purposes (eschatology).

This time of meditation leads naturally to a practical side: the suggestion of a concrete act of conversion.

Finally, the day ends with a suggested prayer that may be from a saint or from the author.

Consideration before starting

The present work does not have as its purpose to replace the Lenten pathways that are offered by parishes during this important liturgical season. It is more like a survival kit in the desert if one has neglected to bring along any provisions. To the *anawim* of today, to the humble of this time, we offer some primers, some small but rich seeds, with the hope that they will grow and nurture the believer in a sustained fashion. May the believer make the effort to use these each day without going on to the text of the next day in order to benefit better from the grace of each day!

Outside of the actual season of Lent, this book, rich in spiritual primers, could also guide every person desiring to “rest a while” with the Lord (Mk 6:31). It could help them to take stock of their life and thus live better the grace of one’s baptism.

Day 1

Ash Wednesday

CONVERTING AND BELIEVING IN THE GOSPEL

Scripture

“Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting with weeping, and with mourning. Rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn back to the Lord, your God.”

Joel 2:12-13

Church Tradition

Saint John Paul II (20th century): “Conversion of the heart is a gift of God, an initiative on his part. Our faith teaches us that this initiative takes concrete form in the mystery of Christ the redeemer, the reconciler and the liberator of man from sin in all its forms. Let us be reminded always of that *vertical* dimension of division and reconciliation concerning the relationship between man and God. In the vision of faith, the *vertical* dimension always prevails over the *horizontal* dimension, that is to say, over the reality of division between people and the need for reconciliation between them.”

Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliation and Penance

Brief meditation

In order to follow Jesus more closely, whether that be in the desert period of holy Lent or during the more ordinary times of our lives, let us first recognize our condition: we are sinners. Let us acknowledge sincerely that

we do not love as we should and that, in order to become true disciples, we must rediscover a living contact with the grace coming from above, the *vertical* dimension, as John Paul II said. This grace does not come except from the Lord alone, for only He knows us perfectly and wants our true happiness.

Concrete act of conversion

Let us find a quiet place to practice some moments of interior silence. This could be a church, a chapel, somewhere in nature, or a private room in your home (Mt 6:6). For several moments let us think gratefully about the God who created us and who has forgiven us in Christ. Let us ask Him for the strength to live these forty days of Lent with the sentiments that animated the Heart of His Son in the desert. During this time of purification, let us consider making some humble gesture of retreat from the world and of greater attachment to His Kingdom; for example, a fast from food, the sacrifice of a daily cocktail, giving up some TV time for a brief visit with a lonely person.

Prayer

Approve, Lord, the ashes (Job 42:6) of my humble repentance and the sweet scent (Mt 6:17) of my good actions. Thank You for offering me this time of penance in order that I might rediscover the purity of heart that will allow me to see You more clearly in all things (Mt 5:8). Free me from selfishness in order that I may serve You better in the poor and the suffering. Amen.

Day 1 of the New Time

Easter Sunday

STRIVING FOR THE REALITIES THAT ARE ABOVE

Scripture

Behold, [the risen] Jesus met the women [Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James] on their way and greeted them....“They approached him, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be fearful. Go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee. There they will see me.’”

Matthew 28:9-10

Col 3:1-2

Church Tradition

Patriarch Athenagoras (19th century): “The Resurrection is the beginning of the transfiguration of the universe.”

Recurrent idea in his preaching

Pope Benedict XVI (20th-21st centuries): “Christianity is always the mustard seed and the tree at the same time, always simultaneously Good Friday and Easter.... What we need are people inwardly seized by Christianity, who experience it as joy and hope, who are true loving souls. These people we call saints.”

The Salt of the Earth

Brief meditation

During this Lent we were renewed in the grace of this important liturgical time, but our earthly pilgrimage continues. Let us experi-

ence it every day with a pure heart, an open mind, and a joyful soul pervaded by the Holy Spirit. Let us keep our “gaze fixed on Jesus” (Heb 12:2), the Risen One Who precedes us into Galilee (Mt 26:32), that is to say, Who awaits us in Paradise, our true homeland. In the last times, He will return to us, descend gloriously to earth to restore everything in Himself, and take us to the Father (cf. 1Thes 4:17). So today, on this holy Easter Day, it is also timely to say with the whole Church, as after each consecration, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20).

Concrete act of conversion

Among the Jewish people, it is customary to invite to the Passover meal family and close friends and to leave an empty place also for the prophet Elijah, just in case the Lord allows him to attend as a surprise guest. Let us be inspired by this beautiful example of faith and charity, and let us consider inviting to our Easter meal some lonely person, one of the *anawim* of the Lord.

Prayer

“On this day of Easter, God our Father, You make accessible to us eternal life by the victory of Your Son over death, and we celebrate His resurrection. May Your Spirit make of us new men and women so that we might rise with Christ in the light of life.”

According to the Entrance Antiphon for Easter Sunday