

Brothers and Sisters,

During Lent we often talk about entering into the desert. It is a time of purification, of spiritual cleansing. We use this image of the desert, because the desert represents a place where all the distractions of our lives are removed. In the desert we are left alone, it is just us, and God. All the things we use to distract ourselves cease to exist in the desert. Cell phones get no signal. cable television is not available, there is no internet, iPods or X-Boxes. It's just us, and God. With all these distractions set aside, we are left to focus on the serious questions, the ones we often chose to avoid. Who am I? Where is my life going? What do I need to be doing to get to Heaven?

Our Lenten fasting, prayer and almsgiving is meant to help us remove the distractions from our lives. We don't enter into fasting, prayer and almsgiving in order to prove that we can do something difficult. No, the Christian life is difficult enough to live, we don't need more difficulties. We fast so that we can enter into the desert and assess who we are and how we are doing in our relationship with God.

In doing this, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus who enters the desert for forty days. The desert, of course is the opposite of the garden. It was in the garden of Eden where Adam and Eve committed the first sin, where the rupture between God and humanity first occurred. The desert, being the opposite of the garden, is the place of reconciliation and healing. So by entering into the desert, we are entering into a place of healing.

However, as we learn, the desert is not only a place of healing, but is a place of temptation and trial. But these temptations themselves, are marked by a certain quality of holiness. The Gospel today tells us that Jesus is led into the desert *BY THE HOLY SPIRIT* to be tempted. The same Holy Spirit guides the Church as she enters into the desert to be tempted and tested. Why is this? Well, because when we are tempted, when we are tested we learn a lot about ourselves, right. And we see this in all areas of life. People want to go to doctors who have proven themselves. One of the big questions with the NFL draft is how well have these athletes been tested? In school, you are tested to see if you have learned the material. The spiritual life is no different. Our relationship with God needs to be tested, and purified.

We see this happen with Jesus. St. Luke tells us that Jesus fasted, he ate nothing for 40 days, and he was hungry. I think this is the biggest understatement in the whole bible. Now think about this for a minute. And let me give you an example to help. When I skip a meal, I am usually starving by the next meal. I am hungry, I get cranky, and ill-tempered. And again, now, this is only after skipping one meal. Jesus was fasting for 40 days, so we can only imagine what kind of mood he is in, and how hungry he is. And it is in this weakened state, that the devil comes to tempt him.

"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." The first temptation. The first trial. Pope Benedict in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* takes special note of how this temptation begins - it challenges Jesus' identity. "If you are the Son of God." The Holy Father states that the devil could very well extend this challenge to us, "If you are the Church of God, then start by making sure the world has bread." The pope is keenly aware of the difficulty in responding to this trial. He says, "It is hard to answer this challenge, because the cry of the hungry penetrates so deeply into the ears and into the soul." Now the devil is tricky here. This temptation seems

to be a good thing. Should we not strive to feed the hungry, to meet the bodily needs of those in the world. Well, of course we should. But listen to Jesus' response, "One does not live on bread alone." This temptation is to focus on bread alone. It does not take God into account. And we see this temptation all the time, don't we? It occurs when we reduce the Gospel to a message of social justice. It occurs when we separate our works from our faith.

We cannot solve the problem of giving bread to the world apart from God. In fact, as the pope points out, every time humanity has tried to solve the world's material problems apart from God, it has led to tyranny, as in communism or national socialism. What the Holy Father proposes is that we look at the words of Jesus in connection with his other statements on bread. In the multiplication of the loaves we learn that it is God himself who will provide bread for the world, and in the Eucharist it is Jesus who offers his body as food that will nourish us. What we learn from the first temptation is that our first priority is to be nourished by the Word of God. Material needs are second to this. In other words, we cannot worry about feeding the world, until we have first been nourished by the Word of God.

The second temptation is the temptation for money and power. This, I think is one that we see constantly in our society, right. People will do the craziest things for money and fame. Reality TV has almost become the ultimate proof of this. But this isn't limited to celebrities or celebrity wanna-be's. How often are we tempted to violate the precepts of our faith to gain some worldly honor or status. This is the temptation to cheat on a test, to fudge a number, to misrepresent a product. It is a temptation that we all face. I experience this as a priest – I could preach a homily that makes everyone feel good every week. And if I did this, my popularity might increase. My status as a priest might increase. But what we learn from this trial is that we are called to an integrity of faith. That we are to place worship of the Lord and fidelity His commandments over our own status and wealth even (or dare I say) especially when it is difficult or inconvenient.

The final temptation that we face in the desert is the temptation to put God to the test. This temptation is all over the place. So often, we tend to think that God owes us proof. That God needs to manifest His power, and do what we tell him to do, rather than the other way around. Isn't this modernity's big objection to belief in God - that God doesn't subject himself to our whimsical desires? That God doesn't prove himself to us. That God doesn't answer our prayers exactly the way in which we want him to? Here, the Pope reminds us that when we put God to the test we implicitly "deny God as God because we have placed ourselves above him, by discarding the whole dimension of love, of interior listening; by no longer acknowledging as real anything but what we can experimentally test and grasp. To think like that is to make oneself God." So this final temptation, is the temptation to view ourselves as over and above God, rather than to submit to God.

So friends, as we enter the desert this Lent, we need to be prepared to face trials and temptation. But let's also be mindful that it is the Holy Spirit who leads us into the desert, so we face these trials knowing they are holy. While trials are never fun, we know that if we call upon the Holy Spirit, we will be able to endure the trials, our faith will be purified, and we will become better followers of the Christian way of life. Peace to you, and all to who enter this Lenten journey.