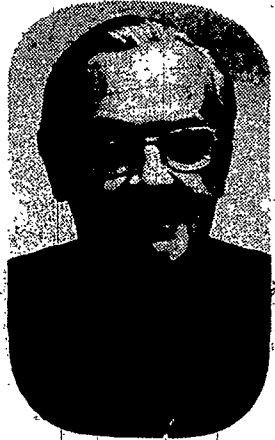


PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

# Desert Spirituality

Taking a cue from last Sunday's Gospel (Jesus' sojourn in the desert) I would like to speak about the spirituality of the desert. Our God comes to us in many ways and places. But there is a long tradition in the Bible and in the history of the Church that it is especially in the desert that God comes to man.



The desert was the region in which the Chosen People wandered for forty years cared for by God alone. It was there that they learned the depths of His love. It was there that, in spite of their infidelities, they learned to love Him. It was there that they learned that He alone sufficed. They could have reached the Promised Land in a few weeks, if they had traveled directly to it. God's plan was that they should learn to love Him in the desert and that they should look upon that time in the wilderness as the idyllic time of their lives when they were with Him alone and where He alone sufficed. It was in the loneliness of the desert wastes that God first came to His people.

And when Israel, after entering the Promised Land, abandoned God for false worship, the prophets of Israel looked forward to a day when God would again come to His people. And He would come to them — in the desert.

There is a beautiful passage in the book of the prophet Hosea, wherein God speaks to the people He had espoused to Himself who had abandoned Him:

I will allure her,  
I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart,  
And she shall respond there  
as in the days of her youth,  
when she came up from the land of Egypt. (Hosea 2:16,18)

God's coming to man in the desert is also a New Testament theme. John the Baptist hears the voice of God — in the desert. Jesus before He begins His public life — goes into the desert. During the years of His public ministry Jesus regularly spent time in prayer with His Father — in the desert. We can only wonder what those hours were like that Jesus spent



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with His Father in the desert, being "turned on" by the Father, coming to realize ever more deeply in His human heart the universal and undefeatable love of the Father. And it happened in the desert.

This tradition of desert spirituality — the spirituality of meeting God in the desert — survived in the Church. When, after the centuries of persecution, the primitive fervor of the Church began to wane, monks like Anthony and Pachomius, Cassian and Basil went into the desert that they might search for God and be found by Him, where they might search for their true selves and in the search find God.

These grand old men — the desert fathers — believed that going into the desert was a return to paradise. They believed that the wilderness had been created as supremely valuable in the eyes of God precisely because it had no value to men. It had no value for men, because there was nothing there to attract them, nothing there for them to exploit. The desert was created by God simply to be itself, not to be transformed by men into something else. The desert, therefore, is the logical place for a person to go who seeks to be nothing but himself, who seeks only to be his real self and in the seeking to find God.

Can this desert spirituality become a reality for us in the twentieth century? In the activist society we live in there are not many deserts around. Yet desert spirituality can be meaningful for us, if we understand that the desert need not mean a physical place. It is rather a life's attitude, an atmosphere with which we surround our lives, where we can go below the surface of the superficial to the depths of our being where we are really ourselves and God is the Ground of all. The desert is an "atmosphere" in which we are able, not just to talk about God, but to experience Him in our hearts, experiencing Him Who is Love. It is interesting that when we speak of someone going into the desert, we speak of him as going into the interior. That is what desert spirituality means: going into our interior, where we are really ourselves.

Going into the desert for us means having the courage to be alone at times — in a loneliness in which we find that we are not really alone, because we experience Another Who is at the heart of reality and in Whom alone we find our true selves. Going into the desert means having the courage to be quiet and silent at times — with a silence that listens to the voice of God speaking in the desert of the depths of our being.

Every man and woman at some time in his or her life has to go into the desert. He has to do this because there is in every man and woman a contemplative dimension that will not be frustrated; or, if frustrated, it will beget restlessness and discontent. For every man and every woman realizes intuitively that there is more to life than what appears on the surface. There are realities beneath the superficialities of life which we must reach or we shall never be at peace. Lent is a time to find these realities — by going into the desert.

## 'Overcome Evil with Good!'

Following is Pope Paul's address given at the general audience on Jan. 25.

Today the Church celebrates the conversion of St. Paul, a decisive event for Christianity, which confirmed the universal vocation of the new religion.



Born in a given country and within the Jewish tradition, it had in the new apostle the missionary who, more than the others, understood and preached the Gospel for all men. For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time. "For this I (it is St. Paul who testifies) was appointed," he writes, "a preacher and apostle... a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth."

Let our reverent and loving greeting go, today, to the apostle Paul, associated with the thought that today, too, the piety of the Church turns to the great and not yet satisfied apostolic desire for the full establishment of unity among Christians. This is done in prayer and in the hope that the aspiration, celebrated in our hearts and, God grant, in those of the Brethren still separated from us, made more ardent and more plausible by contemporary ecumenism, may be crowned by success.

We will then ask St. Paul for a word of his that will

comfort our spirits, upset by so many events of life in the world today, events which shake our confidence in the peaceful progress of peace in the world. We are all grieved by a sad recrudescence of private, but organized, violence in present-day society. This expresses in phenomena of uncivilized disorder the insecurity which afflicts it and which a dominant moral and political pluralism, the counterfeit of freedom, seems to justify.

Moreover economic and social difficulties are spreading with very serious negative effects. These give a glimpse of even worse situations, so that crazy desires of superfluous enjoyment and fears paralysing the normality of work are spreading, creating a psychological climate of mistrust which dries up productive activity and prompts vain and disorderly remedies.

And, as happens, one evil brings forth another, and often worse one. We are all worried. The worst, it is said, is still to come; and a temptation of pessimism spreads and paralyses so many energies, brought forth though they were with such far-sighted consideration of a better future.

The situation is known to everyone. Its shadow hangs over our civilization at this moment and is projected into the history of tomorrow.

Here then is our remedy, drawn from the treasure of the teaching of the apostle Paul. He presents it in his letter to the Romans where, after having exhorted them with stirring suggestions in various directions of moral life, such as must derive from persons enlightened by the faith and sustained by grace, he

sums up his exhortation in the following well known sentence: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

How simple the words of the apostle seem and it seems worth fixing them in our memory.

In the meantime let us note: the apostolic doctrine is an interior one, and aims at changing the easy outlook of those who surrender to disgust and confusion in face of the exterior conditions in which our lives take place. We are in a world not only hostile to our existence for so many physical and material reasons, but also so diverse, owing to the difficulties of its social organization, or rather, owing to the disorder of the factors that prevent it from being orderly, that is, rational and just.

We perceive this maliciousness, which makes social life difficult and sometimes unbearable. What are we to do? Are we to let evil overcome us, that is, to dominate us and absorb us in its spirals which would make us, too, wicked? This is the process of vendetta, which increases evil and does not cure it. Or are we to give in to pessimism and sloth and surrender to cowardly resignation? This is not Christian. The Christian is patient but not inert, not indifferent.

The attitude suggested by the apostle is that of a positive reaction; that is, he teaches us to resist the offense of evil with good; he teaches us to multiply the effort of love to redress and overcome the harmfulness of moral disorder; he teaches us to make for our heart the experience of evil met with on our way a stimulus to greater virtue and more effective activity. So is St. Paul. So are the saints. And so may all of us be!