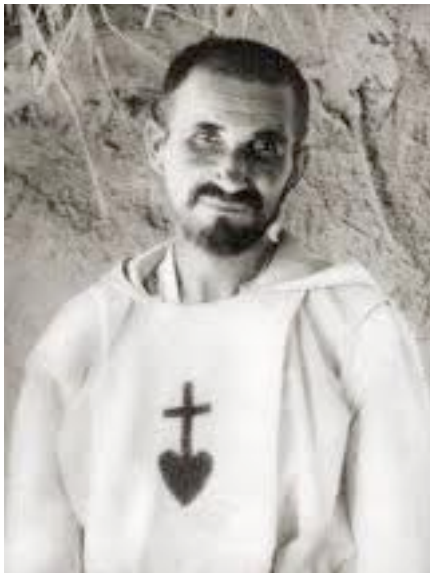
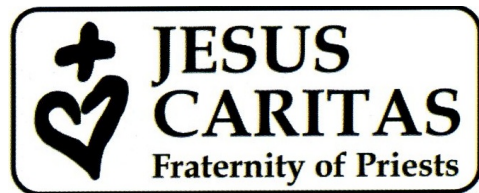


6. Day in the Desert



DAY IN THE DESERT

56. Perhaps one of the directions-of-growth in Jesus-Caritas hardest to appreciate is the concept of the desert. The term comes from the spirituality of Brother Charles and is a classic theme within the history of Christian spirituality. Perhaps, for the American priest the day could be called the "day of solitude" or the "day of simplicity."

How Is It Done?

Specifically, the fraternity member is expected to spend one full day (of at least six hours) each month, completely apart by himself, alone with the Lord, (ideally without materials to read or other spiritual props.) It is a great help if one can get away the night before and spend the next day in solitude.

57. It takes time for members to realize the purpose and to feel the need for this day. Many members in the U.S. have not yet really tried the Desert Day. Those who are faithful to it even in its difficulty will discover its immense benefit for their Christian and priestly lives. Most experience their own radical poverty and total dependence on the Lord and His love. The prayer of the day is simply setting aside the time for the Lord and giving Him a chance to get through to us. In devoting our time solely to Him, we cease all those human activities which can often cover or veil our radical need for God. We come to experience our creature-hood, our fragility, and our deepest desire to live in Him and for Him.

What to Expect

58. For the day, many go into the countryside, to the ocean, or for long walks. Others may simply go to an

empty room and spend the day there. During this day, the review of life should be prepared prayerfully, reflecting upon and interpreting in faith the present understanding of our spiritual life. The desert is not primarily a physical place, but the place where God meets us. Usually the more simple and non-distracting the surroundings, the more favorable the conditions in which to wait on the Lord and listen to Him.

59. We find it so important that each person approach the day with a generous and open spirit. When one begins to attempt the Desert Day, he might discern with his brothers how he should enter the day. He might initially need some materials or the Word. He might need to vary the length or frequency of the Day. What does each one need to experience his own finiteness and God's abundant love for Him? Faithfulness and prayerful discretion will lead him to God on this Day.

An Overview of Spirituality and Method, (Fifth Edition, April 1987),

WAYS TO GO INTO THE DESERT

The concept of the Day in the Desert is to find a quiet place in which I can find a degree of solitude to pray, meditate, write, open myself to God's word. Many find this place more easily if it is remote and removed from the ordinary contacts of life. This should involve several uninterrupted hours. But most of us find it a very difficult practice because we are so unaccustomed to spending time alone.



A DAY OF DISCOVERY

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" is frequently a place of temptation. Some brothers are beset by melancholy, interior desolation, or aridity in the day; others by discouragement. Here one also acutely feels the need for the Holy Spirit in order to persevere in his weakness and to remain faithful.

The desert is an intensive stripping down to essentials, coupled with a strong sense of the Lord's presence and adoration of Him. It is an experience of emptying oneself and experiencing that God alone is the Absolute of one's life. Perhaps the greatest temptation, humanly speaking, is to look for certain results from the Day itself, rather than to be disposed to whatever the Lord might give or not give on that day!

Gerry Keefe,
from BE BROTHERS #3

Jesus Calls

He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat.

Mark 6:31

Response of Brother Charles

A splendid journey to the place chosen for my settlement. May Jesus be praised for everything! I am filled with confusion and adoration at seeing how He arranged things and smoothed out all difficulties. Pray that I may do the good that is to be done here, that I may be faithful. (from *Beni-Abbes*)

Charles de Foucauld LETTERS p. 93

My Response

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.

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"

This very simple prayer was developed as a paraphrase of the publican's prayer in Lk 18:13 and used in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine during the early centuries of Christian faith.. Its purpose is to tune one's inner attention to the presence of the Lord.

.. How fast should I say the prayer? As you pray, you must turn away from focusing on other thoughts that may influence how rapidly you say it. Most times a "walking pace," *andante*, is about right. Sometimes, though, you might need to say it very quickly, trying to end one prayer to the beginning of the next, in order to keep a crack from opening up where other thoughts could push their way in. When I'm agitated or worried, I have to think the words of the silent prayer firmly so that unwanted thoughts don't sneak through a crack. On the other hand, sometimes you may feel so absorbed in the Prayer that you are savoring every word and want to pray it very slowly. You may repeat it a single time, and then coast for awhile — like the blissful feeling in childhood of cranking up a bicycle to a good speed, then standing on the pedals and flying. And I sometimes feel as though I can't repeat the Prayer at all — his glory is so momentous and powerful. I just keep looking at the Prayer in my mind, with wonder.

adapted from . Frederica Mathewes-Green