

Dear Brothers and Sisters, good morning!

Today we begin the Lenten journey, journey of forty days to Easter, to the heart of the Liturgical Year and of the faith. It's a journey that follows that of Jesus, who at the beginning of His ministry withdrew to the desert for forty days, to pray and fast, and to be tempted by the devil. In fact, it's the spiritual meaning of the desert that I would like to talk to you about today.

What does the desert mean spiritually for all of us, also for us that live in cities, what does the desert mean? Let us imagine we are in a desert. The first sensation would be that of finding ourselves enveloped in a great silence: no noises, apart from the wind and our breathing. See, the desert is the place of detachment from the din that surrounds us. It's absence of words to make room for another Word, the Word of God, which caresses the heart as a light breeze (Cf. 1 Kings 19:12). The desert is the place of the Word, with a capital W. In fact, in the Bible the Lord likes to talk to us in the desert. He gives Moses the "ten words" in the desert, the Ten Commandments. And when the people distance themselves from Him, becoming an unfaithful bride, God says: "Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth (Hosea 2:16-17). In the desert one listens to the Word of God, which is like a light sound. Intimacy with God, the love of the Lord is rediscovered in the wilderness. Jesus liked to withdraw every day to desert places to pray (Cf. Luke 5:16). He taught us how to seek the Father, who speaks to us in silence. And it's not easy to be silent in the heart, because we always seek to speak a bit, to be with others.

Lent is the propitious time to make room for the Word of God. It's the time to turn off the television and to open the Bible. When I was a child, there was no television, but there was the custom not to listen to the radio. Lent is desert, it's the time to give up, to tear ourselves away from our mobile phone and connect ourselves to the Gospel. It's the time to give up useless words, slander, rumours and gossip, and to speak and give oneself to the Lord. It's the time to dedicate oneself to a healthy ecology of the heart, to clean it. We live in a polluted environment of too much verbal violence, of many offensive and harmful words, which the network amplifies. Today one insults as if one said "Good Day." We are submerged in empty words, publicity, sly messages. We are used to feeling everything about everything and we risk sliding into a worldliness that atrophies the heart, and there is no bypass to heal this, but only silence. It's hard for us to distinguish the Lord's voice, which speaks to us, the voice of conscience, of goodness. Calling us in the desert, Jesus invites us to listen to what matters, to the important, to the essential. To the devil that tempted Him, He answered: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). As bread, more than bread we need the Word of God, we need to talk to God: we need to pray, because only before God do the inclinations of the heart come to light and the duplicities of the soul fall. Behold the desert, place of life not of death, because to converse with the Lord in silence restores life to us. Let's try again to think of a desert. The desert is the place of the essential. Let us look at our lives: how many useless things surround us! We pursue a thousand things that seem necessary and in reality, aren't so. How much good it would do us to be free of so many superfluous realities, to rediscover what counts, to rediscover the face of the One

next to us! On this also Jesus gives us the example by fasting. To fast is not only to slim down, to fast is in fact to go to the essential and to seek the beauty of a simpler life.

Finally, the desert is the place of solitude. Today also, close to us, there are so many deserts. They are the people that are alone and abandoned. How many poor and elderly are next to us and live in silence, without clamouring, marginalized and discarded! To speak of them doesn't command an audience. But the desert leads us to them, to all those that, silenced, ask for our help in silence. The Lenten journey in the desert is a journey of charity to the weakest.

Prayer, fasting, works of mercy: behold the journey in the Lenten desert. Dear brothers and sisters, with the prophet Isaiah's voice, God has made this promise: "Behold, I am doing a new thing, I will make a way in the wilderness" (Isaiah 43:19). The way is opened in the desert that leads us from death to life. We enter the desert with Jesus, and we will come out of it savouring Easter, the power of God's love that renews life. It will happen to us as it does in those deserts that flower in spring, making buds and plants sprout suddenly "from nothing." Courage, let us enter in this desert of Lent, let us follow Jesus in the desert: with Him our deserts will flower.