

Abide in Christ

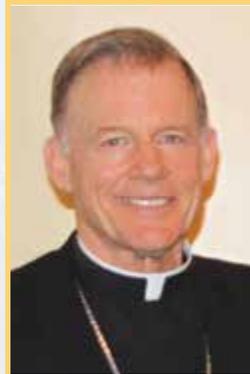
Christ Is Waiting For You

By MOST REVEREND JOHN C. WESTER, ARCHBISHOP OF SANTA FE

During the first week of January, we bishops of Region XIII made our annual retreat at the Redemptorist Retreat House near Tucson, AZ. The retreat house is located in the northern part of the Sonora Desert, nestled near the famous Picture Rocks, named for the ancient hieroglyphics found on them. Each day of the retreat, I enjoyed taking a walk into the desert which is at once beautiful and ominous. The saguaro cactus is abundant along with many other desert flora and fauna. I half expected to see Snoopy's brother Spike leaning against one of the cacti as he takes a nap! But the desert is nothing to joke about. It can be a very dangerous place. Though survival becomes one's first priority, an opportunity presents itself to bask in its beauty

One of the beauties of the desert is how it demonstrates the tenacity of life, how it breaks through the cracked and dry soil. On my daily walks, I saw life springing up in so many ways. For example, I saw cactus growing out of boulders, showcasing how life is so tenacious even in the midst of a hostile environment. It then struck me that our Church is just as tenacious in defending and protecting the precious gift of human life in all its stages. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernadin wrote eloquently on this topic, referring to the Church's stand as a commitment to hold sacred the "seamless garment" of life from conception to natural death. This approach underscores the beauty of life, the sacredness of it and the uniqueness of each unrepeatably human life.

Lent is certainly a time for us to deepen our appreciation for the gift of life. By stripping away all that is not essential - the superficiality, the glitz and glamour - I come to realize what really counts: the sacred gift of life God has given me and my relationship to the God of love who created me in His very image and likeness. Through my prayers, I



Archbishop John C. Wester

relate to God more deeply which helps me realize what really counts... the gift of life. It's not money, not possessions, not power, but the great precious gift of life and my relationship to the Author of life.

Perhaps this is why Jesus went into the desert to begin His public ministry. He knew there He could strip away all that was not essential and deepen His appreciation for the gift of His life, God made man, lived in the presence of the Father. In the desert, Jesus would be alone, truly alone and He could hear

more clearly the voice of His Father calling Him to do His will. In the desert, Jesus confirmed His decision to do the will of His Father as He began a ministry that would eventually lead to His death, resurrection and our redemption. The desert provided Jesus with the venue He needed to make sure He was on the right path even if it was a path fraught with peril and suffering. Of course, this path does not end with the cross but with the resurrection: no cross, no resurrection. It was in the desert that Jesus gathered the strength and the grace He needed to move forward in fulfilling the will of His Father, for Him and for all of us. During those 40 days and nights, Jesus emptied Himself so He could experience anew the love of His Father, the only gift that would truly satiate Him.

No wonder, then, that the church calls you and me to enter into the desert of Lent that we also might confirm our desire to do the will of God in our lives and to deepen in our appreciation for the gift of life. It is in the Lenten desert that we can strip away the superfluous, the unnecessary and do battle with our temptation to make ourselves the center of the universe instead of God, thus reestablish our commitment to follow Christ, no matter the cost. It is in the desert that we will follow the path that leads to the Easter mysteries in which we will celebrate

+ ...His Mercy endures forever.

Psalm 136:1

Christ's resurrection and His triumph over sin and death.
What does the desert of Lent look like?

Our Lenten desert is comprised of three elements: fasting, almsgiving and prayer. By fasting, we are reminded that we are hungry for God. By almsgiving, we are reminded that Christ's body, the Church, is hungry for God. By praying, we are reminded that we are hungry for eternal life with God. These Lenten practices put me in touch with my existential poverty and my journey in the desert reminds me to turn to God, not the world, if I wish to experience the fullness of life.

This Lent, the Church invites us to enter into the desert as we place our trust in God's love, aware of God's deep desire to satisfy our longing hearts and souls. The desert can certainly be difficult: it is never easy to stand alone in the presence of an all-knowing, all-powerful God. But Christ reminds us that we are also in the presence of an all-loving God who wants nothing more than to fill us with His undying love. We enter the desert of Lent to become poor so that God can make us rich in His love and grace. I encourage us all to provide more time in our day for prayer, reflecting on Christ's passion and death so that we will be prepared to celebrate His victory over the grave. I also encourage us to connect our fasting with our almsgiving. Fasting is far more efficacious if it serves as a reminder to reach out to others in need, not out of charity, but because I who am poor and hungry give to my brother or sister who is poor. Such "charity" reminds me that there are many ways to be poor and that in God's presence, we are all poor in one way or another, standing in need of his love and mercy. It also reminds us that the greatest poverty of all is to fail to respect the sanctity of human life given by God to each unrepeatable human being so that we might be one with Him forever in heaven.

As you and I prepare for our Lenten journey, our Lenten retreat in the desert, remember the words of Hosea Chapter 2: "But then I will win her back once again. I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her there." Christ is waiting for you in the desert - may you have a blessed journey.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

+ John C. Wester

Most Rev. John C. Wester,
Archbishop of Santa Fe

