

As in a Film: The Desert Experience

Jesus' life was not free from difficulties. Before beginning his public ministry, he spent forty days of fasting and penance in the desert, where he suffered the temptations of the devil. That experience can show us a way to see difficulties as opportunities to mature in our Christian vocation.

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The plot of a good film often has moments of conflict. If the

protagonist did not have to face problems, it would perhaps be a monotonous and predictable story. But it is these twists and turns that make a film exciting. The viewer then watches as the actor goes through the various setbacks until he achieves what he wanted so much. And at the end of this process, which has had its ups and downs, he will often feel transformed: the character who started the film will be different from the one at the end.

In the history of any person, there are also situations of conflict. There are no biographies without moments of pain, doubt or fatigue. Thus, along with the good moments, these circumstances of conflict also allow us to grow in the ideals that inspire our lives. Jesus himself wanted to embrace a similar experience: he spent forty days of hunger and thirst in the desert, where he suffered the

temptations of the devil (cf. *Mt 4:1-11*).

Choosing who we want to be

After Christ received a manifestation of the Paraclete and of his Father's love in the waters of the Jordan, he was led by that same Spirit into the wilderness *to be tempted by the devil* (*Mt 4:1*). Instead of embracing an easy success before the crowds at the Jordan, he preferred to prepare his public life with the bittersweet taste of abandonment and trial. "Jesus was also tempted by the devil, and he accompanies each of us in our temptations. The desert symbolises the struggle against the seductions of evil, to learn to choose true freedom. In fact, Jesus lives the experience of the desert just before he begins his public mission. It is precisely through this spiritual struggle that he decisively affirms what kind of Messiah he intends to be."^[1]

Through the temptations that may arise in everyday life, we too can decisively affirm who we want to be. If God allows them, it is precisely so that we can discover our truth and purify our love, so that our desires tend towards him. “The Christian’s war is unceasing, because in the interior life there is a perpetual beginning and beginning again, which prevents us from arrogantly imagining that we are already perfect. It is inevitable that there will be many difficulties on our path; if we did not encounter obstacles, we would not be creatures of flesh and blood. We will always have passions that pull us down, and we will always have to defend ourselves against these more or less vehement delusions.”^[2]

The Lord does not leave us alone. At the same time as we experience temptation, we count on the outstretched hand of Jesus to keep us

going. Through these trials, we can better understand who we want to be and freely choose the ideals that move us. Christ understands us better than anyone else when we feel that dilemma between who we want to be and the apparent good that the trial puts within our reach. The way he lived the desert experience can help us to see temptations more realistically: it is not by yielding to them or talking with them that we will find peace, but by resolutely embracing the love that inspires our life.

Listening to hunger

As a true man, after spending forty days of strict fasting and deep prayer, Jesus feels hungry. It is not a one-off appetite, nor is it a mere human need: it is a hunger for survival. Our Lord is at the limit of his human strength. We can imagine him exhausted, his gaze roaming the

arid and infinite landscape, until he settles on some small distant rocks. And imagination, which always transforms necessity into dreams, would perhaps take him along the paths of his fond memories, when he would eat the simple but tasty dishes that his mother would so lovingly prepare for him. It is precisely in such a situation that the tempter appeared on the scene: *If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread (Mt 4:3).*

Adam and Eve succumbed to another insinuation of the devil when they allowed themselves to be seduced by the beauty of the fruit of the tree, instead of communion with God (cf. *Gen 3:1-6*). The people of Israel also fell into despair in the desert because of the lack of food, as they nostalgically remembered the vegetables they ate as slaves in Egypt (cf. *Num 11:5*). It is a test which, in

the end, leads us to meditate on the hierarchy of our heart and to ask ourselves what really counts in life. “Overcoming the temptation to subject God to oneself and one’s own interests, or to put him in a corner, and converting to the right order of priorities, giving God pride of place, is a path that every Christian must always walk anew.”^[3]

When need seems to rebel within him and claim its own rights, Jesus shows the true source of his peace, that which he knows makes him happy: *Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Mt 4:4). Christ does not deny that he is hungry. But he does not want to satisfy it with just any food, but with that which satisfies him deeply: being faithful to the call to redeem all men. *My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work* (Jn 4:34), he

will tell his disciples on another occasion.

The Lord reveals that, when temptation appears, the first step is to recognise it as such. Acting as if nothing is wrong, pretending that one is not really hungry, can provoke a latent tension that little by little makes one desire and look forward to that which at first was rejected. This is why God invites us to listen to the hunger in our heart, so that we do not fill it with the first stones we come across. Through the experience of our need, we can understand a message. We realise that the Lord does not want us to drown that hunger with the fruit of a tree or the vegetables of Egypt, for they can hardly anaesthetise it. His proposal in the face of that need, rather, is that we fill our hearts with what is really important in our lives: love of God and love of others.

Embracing the divine will

The devil does not give up. Jesus Christ allows him to tempt him even more strongly, so that we experience more vividly his identification with the will of his Father and his deep closeness to sinful man. The tempter takes Jesus to the top of the temple. The wind would beat against his naked and weary face; his feet would barely support the weight of his body staggering with fatigue. His eyes, which in a few months would weep bitterly for the inhabitants of the holy city, would pierce with his love every rooftop and go down every alley. Would this not be a good time to reveal his true identity in all its clarity? The shrill voice of the devil suddenly breaks the dense silence of the height. *If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He has commanded his angels concerning you, and they will hold*

'you in their hands, lest you dash your foot against the stones' (Mt 4:5).

At the serpent's crooked insinuation, Adam and Eve became suspicious of God. Why doesn't he want us to eat from this tree? During the forty years in the desert, the Israelites were also suspicious of the freedom the Lord had offered them. Was not our past as slaves better than this freedom full of suffering? In every temptation there is the possibility of God's absence, of his powerlessness or his remoteness. Perhaps it is remembered as a companion from the past, who was once near but is no longer real. Sometimes it is easy to recognise the Lord when things are going well, enjoying the wonders of Eden or contemplating the wonders he performed to free Israel from slavery. But when conflicts arise it seems as if these signs fade away: we long for an extraordinary, clearer manifestation of God's nearness. We

may then think that, if he does not save us immediately, he is not really as good a Father as we had imagined.

Jesus would again experience a similar temptation shortly before his death, when one of the thieves said to him: *Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us* (Lk 23:39). This is a reasoning that follows an overwhelming logic: If you really can do all things, free yourself from this situation and save us. On the other hand, the attitude of the other thief is different: *We are here justly, because we have received what we deserve for what we have done* (Lk 23:40). He does not rebel against the fate that awaits him, but accepts his condition. Therefore, he does not beg Our Lord to change reality or to solve all his problems right now, but rather he recognises his kingship and asks him not to forget him: *Remember me when you come into your kingdom* (Lk 23:42). His prayer was not a demand

– show me that you are the Saviour – but an act of abandonment into the hands of the Messiah – “Do you want it, Lord? I want it too.”^[4]

It is also written: 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God' (Mt 4:7). Christ rejected the second temptation in the desert – and also the temptation addressed to him on the cross – by embracing even more strongly the will of his Father: he accepts that salvation be done as he wills. He did not want to test him or seek shortcuts to alleviate his pain, for he knew that he sought only his good, even though it might be difficult at times to discover it.

“When you truly abandon yourself to the Lord, you will learn to be content with whatever comes, and not to lose your serenity if the tasks – in spite of all your efforts and the appropriate means – do not turn out to your liking... For they will have “turned

out" as it suits God that they should turn out.”^[5] —

Freedom from idols

There is a final test awaiting Jesus. The devil, cunning and persevering, takes him to a very high mountain from which the many kingdoms of the world can be seen, all the glory and power of men. Was he not the King of the universe? Had he not come to unite all peoples and nations in the kingdom of the children of God? A single gesture would be enough for the tempter to help him to fulfil his mission definitively. *All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me (Mt 4:9).* But Jesus' knees would not bend.

Adam and Eve, distrusting God, preferred to set themselves up as gods. The Israelites, too, in their weary wanderings in the desert, sometimes decided to build their own divinities, to the measure of

their illusions and reflecting their own faces. Whenever man distrusts his Father, he ends up worshipping himself. And instead of placing his hope in the mysterious but eternal divine power, he chooses to be content with his own passing glory, however small and easily faded. The devil may not offer us today *all the kingdoms of the world* (Mt 4:8), but he offers us small kingdoms that we may secretly desire in our hearts, and convinces us that this will make us happy enough to keep on walking. In this way we divinise realities that are not God, but “chains that enslave.”

The Lord has created us so that our longings are directed towards him. We are made to share his divine nature –as Adam and Eve intended– and to be happy –as the Israelites sought in the wilderness–. And this means learning to free ourselves from the idols that devalue the path

to fulfilment. “The dynamism of desire is always open to redemption. Even when it pursues paths that go astray, when it follows artificial paradises and seems to lose the capacity to yearn for the true good. Even in the abyss of sin, that spark is not extinguished which enables man to recognise the true good, to savour it and thus to set out on the ascent, for which God, with the gift of his grace, never deprives of his help. Moreover, we all need to walk a path of purification and healing of desire. We are pilgrims on our way to our heavenly homeland, to the full, eternal good, which nothing will be able to take away from us. It is not a question of stifling the desire that exists in man’s heart, but of freeing it, so that it can reach its true height.”^[6]

Pride insinuates that we do not need Our Lord. But Jesus does not allow himself to be deceived by the mirage

presented to him by the devil. He knows that on the outskirts of Jerusalem, on Calvary, the gates of paradise will be definitively opened. From the cross he will teach us what true happiness consists in: to lay down one's life for love. *Get thee hence, Satan, for it is written, 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou worship' (Mt 4:10).*

St. Matthew ends his account of the temptations by pointing out that the devil departed and the angels came to serve Jesus (cf. *Mt 4:11*).

Sometimes the forces of the devil seem invincible. The stresses to which he subjects people can seem to go on forever. This is precisely what he seeks: to rob us of hope and make us believe that the only way out is to give in to what he proposes. On the contrary, the way Jesus experiences

temptation shows us that this approach is wrong and that victory is possible. After all, “the devil is the great liar, the father of lies. He knows how to speak well, he can even sing to deceive us. He is a defeated person, but he moves like a victor. His light is bright like fireworks, but it does not last, it goes out, while the light of the Lord is gentle but permanent.”^[7]

Christ can help us to accept temptations with serenity and to overcome fear in moments of doubt and weakness, for he knows that no action of the devil will be superior to human strength assisted by grace (cf. *1 Cor 10:13*). At no time does Jesus enter into dialogue with the tempter, imagining what would happen if he were to accept any of his proposals. Instead, he cuts him off decisively, making a firm resolution. This is how he responds to the devil’s invitations: by choosing the good that he tries to

hide from him. He does not want to feed on bread, but on the divine word. He does not want to put God to the test, but trusts him. He does not want the kingdoms of the world, but only to serve his Father.

In this way, the Gospel shows us the Lord as “the new Adam who remained faithful where the first succumbed to temptation. Jesus perfectly fulfilled Israel’s vocation: unlike those who previously provoked God for forty years in the desert (cf. Ps 95:10), Christ reveals himself as the Servant of God totally obedient to the divine will.”^[8] Our Lord’s victory over the tempter is also for our benefit: *For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but who has been tested in every way, even as we are, except in sin (Heb 4:15)*. Christ “not only knows as God the weakness of our nature, but also as man he experienced our

sufferings, though he was without sin. Because he is well acquainted with our weakness, he is able to give us the help we need, and in judging us he will pass his sentence bearing that weakness in mind.”^[9] —

After this episode, Jesus will begin his public life. In those forty days in the desert, he wanted to strengthen his spirit for his redemptive mission, which was going to be hard and demanding. The deserts that we may go through in our lives – temptations, crises, setbacks – can also serve as an impetus to mature our Christian vocation and can be a moment of grace. Christ will help us to walk through them hand in hand, knowing that in every desert God hides himself.

^[1] Pope Francis, Angelus, 7-III-2022.

^[2] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 75.

^[3] Benedict XVI, Audience, 13-II-2013.

^[4] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 762.

^[5] St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 860.

^[6] Pope Benedict XVI, Audience, 7-XI-2012.

^[7] Pope Francis, Homily, 8-V-2018.

^[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 539.

^[9] Theodoret of Cyrus, *Interpretatio ad Hebreos*, ad loc.

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