



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS **GENERAL AUDIENCE** *St Peter's Square*

Wednesday, 26 February 2020 [\[Multimedia\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good Morning,

Today, Ash Wednesday, we begin our Lenten journey, a 40-day journey towards Easter, towards the heart of the liturgical year and of faith. It is a journey that follows the one of Jesus, who at the start of his ministry, withdrew to the desert for 40 days to pray and fast, and was tempted by the devil. Today, I would like to speak precisely about the *spiritual significance of the desert*. What does the desert mean spiritually for all of us, also for those of us who live in cities? What does the desert mean?

Let us imagine that we are in a desert. The first feeling would be that of being enveloped by a great silence: no sound besides the wind and our own breathing. The desert is a place of detachment from the din that surrounds us. It is the absence of words to make room for another Word, the Word of God, that caresses our hearts like a light breeze (cf. 1 Kings 19:12). The desert is the *place of the Word* with a capital W. Indeed in the Bible, the Lord loves to speak to us in the desert. It is in the desert that he gave Moses the “ten words”, the Ten Commandments. And when the people distance themselves from him, becoming like an unfaithful wife, God says: “So I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart.... She shall respond there as in the days of her youth” (Hos 2:16-17). The Word of God is heard in the desert. It is like a soft sound. The Book of Kings says that the Word of God is like a sonorous thread of silence. In the desert one finds a renewed intimacy with God, the Lord’s love. Jesus loved to withdraw daily to deserted places and pray (cf. Lk 5:16). He taught us how to seek the Father who speaks to us in silence. And it is not easy to be silent in the heart because we always try to talk a little, to be with others.

Lent is a favourable time to make room for the Word of God. It is the time to switch off the television and open the Bible. It is the time to separate from mobile phones and connect to the Gospel. When I was a child there was no television but there was the habit of not listening to the radio. Lent is a desert. It is a time to give up something, to distance ourselves from mobiles and connect to the Gospel. It is the time to give up useless words, gossip and slander and to talk to

and be informal with the Lord. It is the time to dedicate ourselves to a healthy *ecology of the heart*, to cleanse it. We live in an environment that is polluted by too much verbal violence, by many offensive and noxious words that the internet amplifies. Nowadays, we insult each other as if we were saying “Good Morning”. We are submerged by the empty words of advertising, of underhanded messages. We have become accustomed to hearing everything about everyone and we run the risk of slipping into a worldliness that sullies the heart and there is no bypass to heal this. Only silence. We struggle to distinguish the voice of the Lord speaking to us, the voice of conscience, the voice of goodness. By calling us to the desert, Jesus invites us to listen to what matters, to what is important, to the essential. Replying to the devil who tempted him [Jesus] said: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). We need the Word of God like bread, [even] more than bread. We need it to speak with God: we need *to pray*. Because only before God do the inclinations of the heart come to light and the duplicity of the spirit cease. The desert is a place of life not of death because speaking to the Lord in silence, gives us life again.

Let us try to think of a desert again. The desert is *the place of the essential*. Let us look at our lives: how many useless things surround us! We chase after thousands of things that seem necessary and that in reality are not. How good it would be for us to free ourselves from many superfluous realities, to rediscover what matters, to rediscover the faces of those who are beside us! Jesus also sets us an example of this: fasting. Fasting is knowing how to give up things that are vain and superfluous in order to reach the essential. *Fasting* is not only for losing weight. Fasting is actually going to the essential. It is seeking the beauty of a simpler life.

Lastly, the desert is a *place of solitude*. Today too, there are many deserts near us. They are the lonely and neglected people. How many poor and elderly people are near us and live in silence, without making any noise, marginalized and discarded!. Speaking about them does not increase the *ratings*. But the desert leads us to them, to those who were stifled and who silently ask for our help: many silent gazes that ask for our help. The journey in the Lenten desert is a journey of *charity* towards the weakest.

Prayer, fasting, works of mercy. This is the path of the Lenten desert.

Dear brothers and sisters, God made his promise through the voice of the Prophet Isaiah: “Behold I am doing a new thing; ... I will make a way in the wilderness” (Is 43:19). A new path opens up in the desert, which takes us from death to life. We enter the desert with Jesus and we will leave it experiencing Easter, the power of God’s love which renews life. It will happen to us just as it does to deserts that blossom in spring, suddenly sprouting buds and plants “out of nothing”. Take courage, let us enter this Lenten desert. Let us follow Jesus in the desert: with him, our deserts will blossom.

Special Greetings

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Indonesia, the Philippines and the United States of America. May the Lenten journey we begin today bring us to Easter with hearts purified and renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Upon you and your families I invoke joy and peace in Christ our Redeemer. May God bless you.

Lastly, I greet young people, the elderly, the sick and newlyweds. Today, Ash Wednesday, the Lord shows us the path of faith to follow. Allow yourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit on this journey of conversion, in order to rediscover the joy of Christian hope.

Appeal

I wish to renew my closeness to those who are sick with the coronavirus, to the healthcare workers who are caring for them, to civil authorities and to all those who are involved in assisting patients and stopping the contagion.