

LIGHT IN THE DESERTS OF THE WORLD

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PART 1

WHICH DESERTS ARE WE REFERRING TO?

First, I wish to thank you for inviting me at this gathering of the Charles de Foucauld Lay Fraternities of North America. And welcome to Quebec to you all.

Those of you who come from the USA will readily observe that gathering in the suburb of Montreal on this 28th of June (a week away from the summer solstice) is not exactly the desert. Yet there is a certain originality since Quebec's official language is French.

LIGHT IN THE DESERTS OF THE WORLD

You have chosen the paradoxical theme «LIGHT IN THE DESERTS OF THE WORLD ». Yet, real deserts, which we may term physical or ecological, are already full of light. What defines the desert is the absence of water, a radical absence which causes the rarity of vegetal and animal life.

For many years in the French language, the word desert signified the absence of human presence, a wild expanse. Such is the case in English also.

We read in Matthew 4,1 that Jesus was led to the desert by the devil to be tempted by him. I. Some have translated the Greek word ,«eremos»(desert) by wilderness. What typifies the desert is not the absence of humans but the aridity of its biophysical environment , so harsh for life. Consequently, the desert is an environment where we find all obstacles and all poverties, where any human being who wanders will experience solitude and distress, fear and eventually death. He who confronts the desert confronts the limit beyond which there is no limit.

Consequently one can comprehend that the desert is charged with an enormous symbolical force, as evidenced in the three monotheistic religions : Jewish, Christian and Arabic, as is also the case for other religions.. The desert is also a place of deprivation and radical poverty. It is therefore the place to meet God and the Absolute. The desert is at once beautiful, terrible and fascinating. Its harshness and hostility create a vertigo where the Eternal is revealed. The desert is total solitude and contemplation. It is the essential symbol of prayer and of the quest for the spiritual. It symbolizes the flight from worldliness, the casting aside of our «self», our riches, our jewels, our fine garments and our social status in the quest of what is essential. Yet, precisely because of this flight and asceticism, the desert is also the haunt of the devil and temptation. One is reminded of the quote from Matthew 4.1 :«Jesus was drawn to the desert by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil.» .Strange paradox that the repose of God is also the den

of the devil. By its very excesses, the desert favors the exposure of what is repressed, the precarity of all the victories we presume we have won over our passions and our desires.

MUST ONE HAVE BEEN IN THE DESERT TO SPEAK ABOUT THE DESERT ?

A question lingers in my mind : must one have been in the desert to speak about the desert ? Very few people live in the desert. The few people who do are comprised of nomads who watch over small flocks which roam at the whim of the seasons and the water-holes. We also think of the Peuls or Tuaregs, or the Indian nations of the USA or in the Andean deserts of Peru. For most of us, the desert is an imaginary place with, in the background, camels in the Sahara or mule trains in Nevada or the Grand Canyon. I have had the opportunity of crossing the Death Valley desert at Easter time and experienced the marvelous sight of the flowering cactus. Our desert here in Quebec occurs in winter. Snow is our sand and when the wind blows, it sculpts the snow like waves on the ocean and builds dunes across our roads. On such days we feel fragile and regret the day when Napoleon Bonaparte sold Louisiana (King Louis' country) to the USA. In 1803, for 15 million dollars.

I believe that to sense the desert internally, one has to experience it a little. Blessed are those who have experienced the burning sand or the hard rock, blessed are those who have slept, or not slept, under the stars with a piercing cold upon them. In the mountains or upon the sea, in thick forests or in a snow storm, blessed are those who have experienced fear and have doubted about themselves to the extent of even doubting if they believed in someone else.

ON THE PATH OF CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? asks Jesus to those whose curiosity has drawn them to John the Baptist (Mt 11,7). A reed swayed by the wind? A man dressed in fine clothes? You went to see a prophet answers Jesus, a man of God, a man whose words echo another Word». What has drawn you on to the path of Charles? Fascination for the desert no doubt. The strange and impossible destiny of this man yearning for God who flees from one monastery to another until at last he discovers the desert, silence and humility. Who refuses the priesthood for a long time until he finally consents in order to accompany soldiers right up to their death bed. In walking in his footsteps are you seeking the man from Nazareth who dreamt all his life of founding a religious order but did not succeed in attracting even a few disciples able to live their daily lives near him? Fathomless mystery this Charles de Foucauld. He seeks solitude and silence but dreams of being the universal brother. He is peaceful and tender, yet he is assassinated probably because the French army had built an arsenal near his hermitage. He had agreed to leave his hermitage for the arsenal and he is killed in a strange and enormous imbroglio. His only wish is to be a monk and spend his time praying, yet he spends endless days writing a Tuareg dictionary and translating Tuareg poems which reflect an astonishing erotic content.

What gives unity to Foucauld's life are the immensity of his love and what I would term his nomadic impulsiveness. Foucauld is a crazy lover, a mystic with a burning heart. When he discovers God, he is totally fixated by him. . This will not hinder his studies nor his work but his loving fixation remains always total, possibly hiding the unconscious sublimation of his love for his cousin Marie de Bondy. Foucauld wanted to be totally religious. He was somewhat of an imperialist and convinced of the superiority of French and European culture over the African. Yet, despite his strong religious and monastic character,

Foucauld never dissociates love of God from love of mankind. Whence his will to share and to be embedded amidst people. He does not wish to help as much as he wants to «be with». He wants to be embedded, to be close. Never let the power of money be an obstacle between him and others. Foucauld does not express his train of thoughts coherently. His theology is very traditional and rather poor. Foucauld is not a thinker but a lover. I think that for him the link between God and his brothers and sisters is accomplished by the mediation of the eucharistic presence. The Body of Christ is the symbol of this presence. Of He who has renounced force and has deliberately chosen the last place.

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WHAT ARE OUR DESERTS?

In Foucauld's footsteps we strive in our time to pursue as far as possible the mystic experience.. Contact with the ecological desert should be a privileged path to follow This said, the fraternities are lay. Faith is rooted in and by insertion into the world, in the construction of history, in conjugal love with all its carnal and spiritual fullness, in family love and in the fascinating and difficult experience of fatherhood and maternity, followed by an abundance of joy with the birth of our grandchildren and other children to the fourth, even the fifth generation. Faith is embodied in the difficulties of work because, whether we want it or not, work does claim thirty to forty years of our life. Work is much more than earning our daily bread. Furthermore, there are numerous other secular responsibilities, neighborhood development, association and volunteer involvement, participation in politics, labor unions, involvement at the municipal, regional and federal levels.

Well then you may ask, where are our deserts? The physical desert is mainly the lack of water. Our spiritual and social deserts are found in any environment which, under the appearance of abundance, easy life and luxury harms the development of the human being. In the physical desert the scarcity is obvious,. In the spiritual desert, one has to discover it.

The paradox of our society is that it fosters poverty at a rapid rate, much faster than it creates affluence. As pope Francis declared, the poor are no longer compatriots, equal citizens. The poor is a reject of our society. People my age have experienced the post-war revolution, the birth a consumer society and the ensuing abundance. In the 50's and 60's we witnessed an extraordinary democratizing of wealth and the creation of what is termed a Welfare State which offers services to all citizens, notably in education, health, support to the aged and welfare payments to the poor. There are nuances of course in the application of these policies whether we refer to the USA or Canada, or different States or Provinces.within those countries. These were good times inspired by solidarity and the reduction of inequalities. We spoke then of the «radical sixties ».

Since thirty years however we have observed a reversal of this phenomenon, a reversal I call the revenge of the rich. The teachings of Malthus are not spread throughout society. The rich are convinced they pay too much taxes and that parasites live at their expense. The rich are convinced they are the motor of society. The marketplace has become the sovereign regulator and we see numerous powerful companies suing poor countries in court and demanding compensations because of environmental or social State laws which hinder free trade.. Economic forces have a stranglehold on our societies and impose their agenda and policies on the political system. Furthermore, national States are unable to

control an economy that has become worldwide and always threatens to relocate depending on shifting opportunities.

As a result we witness the multiplication of deserts growing in our societies. On the exterior, as says the poet «All is in order and beautiful, calm luxury and pleasure», inside, desert enclaves grow incessantly. They include whole social groups, Indians of Canada and the USA, Blacks, Mexicanos in the USA, Haitians in Quebec. There are also countless people living at the margin, such as soldiers returning from war suffering from post-traumatic shock syndromes, drug addicts, the aged, the mentally ill who are abandoned on the streets because it is less expensive and their families cannot care for them. A recent article (La Presse on June 16, 2014, quoting from The Guardian) reveals that one of the largest shrimp growing providers in the world (Charoen Pokphand Foods) holds its Burmese and Cambodian workers in slavery, making them work for up to 20 hours a day and subjecting them to extreme violence such as summary executions, tortures and insalubrious working conditions. And all the while, the very rich invest their money in fiscal havens. Others who are less rich set up parallel networks to circumvent laws and other constraints. For better than a year now a Public Inquiry held in Quebec has unmasked the corruption fostered by the mafia in order to manipulate government and public spending, especially in the areas of road and building construction, to their advantage. I doubt that the situation is different elsewhere in Canada or in the USA. Who funds political parties and election campaigns? Who controls the shady aspects of consumerism?

To render society coherent, the conservative (right) ideology leans on the return of law and order. .A repressive society whose aim it is to punish and imprison delinquents. The scapegoat of our society is not the perpetrator of major crimes but on the contrary, the weak and marginal who did not benefit from the same opportunities and got caught.. This ideology glorifies the rich and the powerful and humiliates the weak. It is an ideology of power and disdain, where love and forgiveness are literally crimes against humanity. Parallel to our existing societies, above them even, the rich are establishing a new society, a « world class society » residing in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, with its own networks, its institutions, its havens in tropical and ecological paradises

In such a world, one must have great courage to be, as Foucauld proposes, the disciple holding the last place.. Christian faith is rooted in an unusual and strange conviction, the kenosis (1). It is by relinquishing his strength, by becoming weak, that God reveals his love for us. That is why one requires a very strong mysticism, a dazzling discovery of the heart of God to break with what the Gospels term the spirit of this world. And then we must get going., be active and do our part in the unique revolution not yet accomplished, to make love possible and real, concrete and efficient here and now. «I was hungry and you fed me».. .

Such for me is the calling of the Gospels. It is also the way of Charles de Foucauld. The ball is in your hands.

Tuesday of holy Week

PART 2

WHAT LIGHT COULD WE CAST ON OUR DESERT?

In my preceding talk my goal was to explain that the environmental desert is a result of lack of water which limits the development of life and forbids to a large degree the stable establishment and growth of human life. Not that anyone should judge the fact that certain human societies have succeeded through their wisdom and culture to thrive in the desert and from the desert.

I then proposed that we consider the desert amongst mankind not as a place lacking water but as a place lacking humanity, love and justice.

Psalm 52 links strongly the lack of justice and godlessness.

Do all these evildoers know nothing?

They devour my people

Such is their bread

They never call on God.

I cannot help but reflect upon the transformation of corn or other wheats into ethanol which serves to power our motors, with the resulting hike in the price of cereals and the ensuing starving of the poor. The technological and economic rationale is blind to the perversion it fosters because it has lost the meaning of humanity. Economics is no longer a humanism (in the word economics we find the word eco, which means environment or house) but a pure technology which, in theological terms has become idolatry. Technology is no longer at the service of mankind, it is mankind, the poor more precisely, which is at the service of technology and its calamitous results.

What light could we cast on our deserts?

1. Prayer.

To walk in Foucauld's heritage I believe the first step has to be a spiritual experience. Foucauld is a transcendent mystic, a man burnt by God like Elijah, Isaac and Moses. He learned how to pray with the Trappists. He practiced a lengthy and slow meditation. Despite their highly emotional language his spiritual writings seem to camouflage the dryness and aridity one experiences in prayer. Foucauld did not transmit a particular method of meditation and the branches of the Foucauld family I have known – the Jesus Caritas Fraternities of Priests and the Lay Fraternities- seemed reserved on the matter. I remember a couple which was invited by the Little Sisters of Jesus on the Anniversary of Charles de Foucauld. Without preparation, they were invited to meditate for an hour in silence. These people were horrified and never returned.

Regardless how we name it meditation, mental prayer or contemplation, prayer without a supporting formula is always difficult. The Jesuit teaching proposes a very strict formula where he who prays concentrates on a specific theme and develops this theme according to a specific psychological process which leads to a conversion and a practical application. The Sulpician method in which I was trained proposes a precise path :: Jesus in my eyesight, Jesus in my heart, Jesus in my hands. Many people pray by reading the Scriptures slowly and lovingly : the lectio divina. I do not think there exists a single method which is ideal, infallible and appropriate for everyone, He who wishes to pray must plunge into the experience. What's in fashion these days is are the oriental methods centered not on thought and introspection but on breathing on the one hand and the elimination of the thinking mind on the other. It's a matter of unraveling the mind and eliminating thinking. Wherefrom the recourse to the mantra. In the wake of John Main, an Irish benedictine monk who died in Montreal, I practice what is termed christian meditation .which consists in using the technique of «non-knowing» in a state of abandonment to God..

In the Christian tradition, prayer consists in a meeting with God, a form of dialogue resting on inner silence. We experiment the otherness of God , a God who is more present in my own interior than I am to myself. The All-Other resides in the depth of my being, he is more myself than I am. As St Augustine, once said «You were in me and I was elsewhere». In Buddhism the ultimate goal of meditation is the death of all desires which finally leads one to an awakening and to beatitude.. In Christian spirituality we also refer to the purification of desire. Saint Augustine has this baffling saying : your prayer is your desire. He does not refer to rhe satisfying of sensual pleasures, but to the absolute desire, the desire of the other's desire. At this stage, the mystics refer to the phenomenon of illumination and the unified way (voie unitive). Beyond these concepts, there is a similarity among various approaches.

In the francophone milieu one can find numerous excellent works on meditation, its sources, its processes and its authors. Christian meditation is not a therapy leading to personal wellness. It is a quest for God and therefore a radical openness on human solidarity because the human being was created in the image of God. Denying human beings is a return to the idols.

2. The spiritual and the religious.

In our contemporary culture, two words are acquiring a new meaning, the religious and the spiritual. In Foucauld's time these two words were linked. ...The spiritual experience was found in religion. Due to the evolution of culture, the quest for ever-growing autonomy by individuals, the rivalry between doctrines, religion is now perceived as an institutional phenomenon. Every religion has a teaching on salvation, an orthodoxy, it proposes and even imposes rituals, proclaims rules of moral conduct, and defines a territory between those who belong within and those who are excluded. In other words, religion is complicated and has acquired a certain negativity It is «out» On the contrary, the word spiritual is fashionable. It is light. In Greek we would say pneuma breath, wind, lightness. The spiritual signifies what is within, interior, what goes to our gut to make us breathe. It also signifies what rises, what leaves the earth below and flies off to heaven, a symbol of lightness and freedom. An atheist is without religion but not necessarily without spirituality, more especially because the distinction between what we used to term the material and the spiritual is now blurred. Furthermore, quantic physics has unbolted numerous dogmatic interpretations of what we used to call reality.

In a society where a stifling technological rationality prevails, where a crazy materialistic consumerism is rampant, people questing for fresh air turn to spirituality. Without that we would suffer from spiritual asthma. Of course there are those who would recuperate this need through an ingenious marketing scheme. Everything has a market value these days. A hundred years ago, Charles de Foucauld's quest was prophetic.

Wednesday of Holy Week

3. The cosmic conscience.

For many, the experience of the physical desert is pure ecstasy. One finds in the desert a presence so mysterious that it is often translated into religious terms. God is present.

The environmental crisis forces us to rediscover the roots of our relation to the cosmos where we live. A certain Christian tradition has taken too literally the blessing found in Genesis 1,28 «Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it». Man has forgotten that, in the image of God who cares for the creation with a loving and respectful care, he has been mandated to care for a fully integrated creation, But man has rather exploited earth's resources excessively. The abhorring environmental crisis is a direct result of this deviation.

I did not insist on the fact that deserts are sometimes a result of man's doing. The systematic cutting of trees –particularly in the huge amazonian forest- is cause for an immense concern, Of concern also is the over-grazing in the semi-Andes regions. Mankind creates deserts and risks the destruction of the very basis of life and survival on earth.

It is quite normal that due to our epoch's spiritual crisis there is a movement towards new vectors of spiritual experience under different names : cosmic spirituality, ecological or environmental ecology.. In this context, science comes to the rescue of faith by demonstrating the coherence and the evolution of the cosmos and life over an incredibly large span of time and space.: the Big Bang, the emergence of time-space, the billions of years, the billions of galaxies containing billions of stars. The history of life on Earth since approximately 3.5 billion years strikes our imagination and awakens a sense of admiration for the work of God.

«When I consider your heavens the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars which you have set in place,

What is mankind that you are mindful of them?»

Thursday of Holy Week

Ps 8 4-5

In the United States, authors like Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry are exploring new avenues. The French tradition has benefited since a long time from the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin with his concept of a Christ Omega. We can also refer to «panentheism», a new perception of the presence and immanence of God in our world..

We must rediscover the archaeology of our body. The duality of our soul and our body must be replaced by a more integrated vision of both. Our body is the corporeal dimension of our soul and our soul is the spiritual dimension of our body. . Our body is marked by the immense history of life which started with the first bacteria which appeared in water 3.5 billion years ago, followed by the long lineage of Homo as our ancestors adopted the erect position and perceived life differently approximately 3 million years ago. As Stephen J.Gould likes to say, nature crafted the human body very patiently.

Through our morning prayer, all of creation that lies in us becomes conscious of itself. Every morning, we must immerse ourselves in this unfathomable mystery : I am a grain of sand in the immensity of the world, I am star dust, I am all of creation accessing the word and exchanging with God word for word. Reminiscing the act of Creation, the text from Genesis repeats like a refrain : God said that light, the stars, and all nature be and they were, and God saw that this was good. In answer to God's word, each morning we must immerse our selves in this world and be the answer to God's creating word. Ugliness, destruction, annihilation are not adequate responses. Praise must be rendered. A mystique of insertion and of belonging .with a responsible ethic.

4. Social analysis.

I have proposed to name desert any place where the human experience cannot thrive because of injustice, hatred, rejection, absence of a benevolent and forgiving attitude. The deserts are numerous and it would be presumptuous to try and name them. It is for your Fraternities to do so. Each individual can do his part by studying his social or professional environment or through an examination using the review of life approach with others.. When does a situation become an appeal or a calling for me personally here and now?. When does a concrete suffering become a call from Jesus? « Come and follow me. I was hungry and you fed me».

A commitment may also rally the group, the team or the fraternity. I remember a group in Lyon which had set up a literacy program for Algerian immigrants. The solitudes and the distresses are so obvious that one must want to close his eyes and his ears in order not to perceive a calling.

In the past, fraternities held a journal called the diaire where the engagement of the brothers and the sisters was consigned. One could read about an abundance of imaginative resources and extraordinary goodness. Love gives life to a society, not money. And that is what we must be a witness to.

I believe a lay spirituality cannot exist without an active and structured answer to the distresses and expectations of this world. For people in religious orders the tasks will be entrusted by others and accepted with obedience , in line with the charisma of each order. For lay people, I tend to think that it is a duty to seek, to detect, to conduct a hermeneutic study of the social reality. This searching may require a very detailed study of social reality and the use of complex operational strategies. In this process, the lay approach may differ from the religious, clerical or Church approach. We often do this when we practice a revision of life. .And now and then, we take a day off, called also a desert day, to seek refuge in silence and find our bearings. Getting to the bottom of things takes time and perseverance.

The Gospel of Joy

Pope Francis has written an admirable apostolic exhortation on the joy found in the Gospels. We have the obligation of being witnesses to God's radical goodness, to heed the calling to show love towards each human person, rich or poor, successful or a failure. No one can descend so low that God can not reach out to him. But no one can be reached if he refuses love.

Pope Francis comes from a region we used to call the Third-World and this transpires in his writings. He speaks with irony about the scent of sheep. The shepherd must be permeated by the odor of the sheep. We all know that a farm and a house have a certain scent. We live in an aseptized world and we hold body odors in horror : in English we say BO Body odor , in French blessante odeur. (aggressive odor). It's the first time I see a pope dare to speak about the nose and the odor of people.

We often hold a moralizing conception of Christian life. In that perspective we can never rejoice because there is always a new drama, a new challenge, a new scandal. In such a spirit, our overloaded conscience does not guide us well in our quest on the road to action. We risk to exaggerate in our diagnostics and exempt ourselves from becoming involved, or we cultivate an excessive anxiety. But where has joy gone? For pity's sake let us open our windows. Let us laugh, sing, pray because these are the days of the Resurrection and of Hope.

I thank you and wish you a long life in memory of Charles de Foucauld.

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