

To Vincentians throughout the world

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

The desert plays a special role in both the Old and New Testaments. It is a place of wandering and purification, of trial and temptation, of dryness and death. But it is also a mobile school where God's people learn to live in solitude, to meditate, to grasp life in its essentials, to depend on God. One of the great themes of Exodus is the abiding presence of a provident, loving God during the journey through the desert: "The Lord walked at the head of the group by day as a pillar of cloud to guide them on the way..., and at night was a pillar of fire to lighten their path" (Ex 13:21). The Lord's presence was constant, caring _ supplying them with food in the desert and nourishing them with his word, his law. The Lord rebuked them when they sinned and forgave them when they repented. The Lord tested and strengthened their fidelity, then defeated their enemies, and finally led them into a land flowing with milk and honey. In a lovely image, Hosea sees the desert as the courting place for God's ongoing, sometimes tumultuous, relationship with the chosen people: "So I will allure her. I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart" (Hos 2:16).

This year's gospel for the First Sunday of Lent reminds us that the desert is also a place of demons. There Jesus, led by the Spirit, meets Satan, who places before him, in symbolic form, the temptations of bread, power, fame. In our Vincentian Family we recall that Luke uses Jesus' "desert-experience" precisely as the introduction to his entrance into the synagogue at Nazareth where he proclaims, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, therefore he has anointed me, to bring glad tidings to the poor he has sent me" (Lk 4:18).

In preparation for the coming of the third millennium, the Church asks us, in 1998, to focus on the Holy Spirit. So I encourage you in Lent to allow the Spirit to lead you into the desert, as Jesus did, that the Spirit might empower you for a renewed mission. Our Christian tradition tells us that the journey will be turbulent but rewarding. Let me reflect with you briefly about three aspects of that journey.

1. The gospels call us to grow in confidence that the Spirit accompanies us in the desert. Luke's gospel, which we read every Sunday this Lent, emphasizes the Spirit's presence in all of life's moments, both in light and in darkness. In Luke, the Spirit comes down upon Mary at the moment of the Incarnation (1:35). The Spirit also fills Jesus at the time of his baptism and then leads him into the desert for forty days (4:2).

Having conquered Satan, Jesus returns to Galilee in the power of the Spirit (4:14) and opens his ministry (4:18). Jesus rejoices in the Spirit (10:21). He assures his followers that his heavenly Father will give the Spirit to all who ask him (11:13) and tells them that the Spirit will teach them everything they need to say in times of persecution (12:12). Luke's second book, the Acts, accents the Spirit's abiding presence in the life of the Church. For Luke, the Spirit is God's providence, his accompanying love. Luke calls us to trust in the Spirit of Lord with exuberant confidence.

Remember how eloquently St. Vincent exhorted us to entrust ourselves to God's provident care: "We must abandon ourselves to God `as a little child does to its nurse.' If she puts him on her right arm, the child is content. If she moves him over to her left, he does not care. He is quite satisfied provided he has her breast. We should, then, have the same confidence in Divine Providence seeing that God takes care of all that concerns us just as a nursing mother takes care of her baby" (SV X, 503). As evangelizers our mission is to communicate words of hope to the poor. If our own trust in providence is deep, our lives will testify, whether we are preaching or whether we are silent, that the Spirit abides within us and breathes out through us.

2. I urge you to reflect, during Lent, on the temptations that we inevitably meet as the Spirit guides us through the desert. None of us is spared these. The Spirit is a pillar of fire to lighten our path on the journey, but daily events allure us to follow other pillars of fire as we wander through the desert. For those holding authority, the temptation of power is great; for those laboring in the market place, the temptation of money; for those engaged in preaching, the temptation of popularity; for those longing for relationships, the temptation of easy or irresponsible sex; for those serving in the face of dire poverty, the temptation of discouragement; for those living in the midst of violence, the temptation of violent response. None of these ever satisfies. None brings ultimate meaning. None plumbs the depth of the mystery of the human person. We find our hunger satisfied, our thirst quenched, only in the person of a loving, provident God who walks with us always. That was the lesson the Israelites learned in the Exodus. This Lent each of us must ask himself: what is the greatest temptation I face as a missionary?

3. Finally, this Lent the word of the Lord calls us to preach the presence of this provident God out of deep personal conviction. The Scriptures pose the challenge: Do you yourself, the evangelizer, sense that God walks with you everyday? When others hear you speak of God, are they stirred to believe? Do you see God, as the psalmist does, in the rising of the sun and in its setting? Is God's name written, as the author of Deuteronomy suggests, on the doorposts of your home so that you think of the Lord in your coming in and in your going out? Do you also see God in the daily life of the poor: in their struggles, in their search for justice, in their hoping against hope, in their suffering, in their hospitality, in their gratitude? Each of us who preaches can ask himself those questions. Our mission focuses on God's loving, provident presence, on God's indwelling Spirit. That is the good news. Are we able to state to others with conviction that God is our Father, our Mother, our all, as St. Vincent said (SV V,

534)? If we can do that, the popular missions we preach will be very much alive, the seminaries where we teach will be centers of God's indwelling, our foreign missions will be vibrant forces for evangelization.

"There is no better way to assure our eternal happiness than to live and die in the service of the poor, within the arms of providence, and in a real renunciation of ourselves by following Jesus Christ" (SV III, 392). That is, I suggest, what the Spirit wants to teach us this Lent.

Amen. Alleluia. May the Spirit of the Risen Lord fill you.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General