



Tracks  
in the sand of the Sinai Desert

Rome, February 14, 2007

Dear Sisters,

One week from today Lent will begin, in Latin the time of “Quaresima” or 40 days. Forty days of Lent – does this not stir up, time and again, an association with an “endless” period of time, a time which, moreover, demands of us conversion? We ask ourselves: What can we do – individually and as a community? Or what should we give up? Such considerations are certainly important, but there is the danger that they remain too exterior. We want to “achieve” something so that we can say after the 40 days: I, or rather we, have done this or that. But Lent means more. We find this expressed very clearly in the Gospel of the first Sunday of Lent, which tells us about the temptation of Jesus, this year in the

version of Luke. In this letter, therefore, I want to direct our attention to the desert, to this living space into which Jesus went at the beginning of his public life.

The desert is not only a geographical place, but also rather a symbol for our human existence. It invites us to see and understand our own life in a new light. The desert is indispensable for our spiritual life. “In its silence and vastness, but also with its possibility of exposure and fright, the desert is a spiritual ‘place’ which can mediate spiritual experiences.” (Gisbert Greshake)

But we cannot search for or “make” a desert or the experience of a desert by ourselves. Also Jesus did not seek the desert, he was – according to Matthew and Luke – “led by the Spirit into the desert” or as Mark expresses it more strongly “driven into the desert.” So, in the beginning there is a call, a leading, and an impulse from God. Also the Israelites dared to go into the desert only after God had called them. God always takes the initiative. He calls; he lures us into the desert like a lover. “Whoever wants or is willing to create a desert in one’s life must ask oneself about one’s relationship to the **One** who is attracting into the desert. It is an invitation to let go, to examine one’s attachments, to recognize the status of one’s own life and to ask where one’s viewpoints are hardened. When one gets an insight into who God is and what meaning he can have in one’s life, then one will try to follow the call into the desert in one’s own life. It is a call to follow Christ that demands the obedience of faith. Therefore to create a desert means ‘exodus,’ departure from the well-established customs, rites and life-styles.” (Margarete Niggemeyer) The desert challenges all our would-be securities. “There is no harmonious as-well-as. Everything is light or dark, hot or cold. The motto of the desert is either/or, all or nothing!” (Gisbert Greshake) It is not easy to tolerate this and not give up. Sluggishness can recur, aversion, boredom, everything that the fathers of the desert called “akedia.” The desert challenges us to make a decision, to expose oneself to it and to accept its laws, or to escape, away from God, back into our self-made securities. There are two ways to experience the desert. One author expressed it with the following image: “To hasten from flower garden to flower garden and to remain interiorly a desert.” Or: “To listen long enough to the desert until in the depth of our being a flower garden grows, until poverty becomes richness, uprootedness becomes home, and emptiness is transformed into fullness.” (A.Gutl)

We cannot cross the desert alone. Each caravan of camels can only cross the apparently endless and unmarked desert when a donkey is leading it. Because of his unequalled sense of direction he leads the caravan with absolute security to its destination. Similarly for us, we can pass through the desert only when we go with Jesus. (Cf. Mt 20:17) The tracks, which Jesus has left behind in the desert, are essential for us. We may not lose sight of them, but follow them step-by-step. Yes, step by step – because every step is a risk, an adventure, a struggle with God. We experience our own inability, our total limitation.

But it is precisely that which gives God the chance to take over **everything**. The question is not to show spiritual “achievements” at the end of Lent. There is no question that renunciation and abnegation are important, but they are not an end in themselves. When we go with Jesus we do not remain in renunciations, but we will become free for greater things. “We will get an understanding for the important things, not to practice this or that sacrifice, but to become free for the others. To be there for them, to have time for them, to be available for them. Jesus was there for all. To go with Jesus means therefore: to be available for the others.” (Paul Jakobi)

Lent is first of all a personal call to go into the “desert” and to meet its challenges. Each one of us should ask herself in sincerity: What are my addictions? Which compulsions are still influencing me? Where do I not have control over my freedom? It is essential “to practice and realize what we have become by Baptism: the new human being in whom Christ is becoming visible.” (German Missal) Doesn’t this remind us of the themes of the Provincial Chapters and the General Chapter?

Also as a Congregation we can experience the desert, and maybe now we are right in the midst of it. When we accept the desert then it will become true also for us – as for Israel – that we will experience God for whom nothing is impossible: “See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers.” (Is 43:19)

I want to close with a story from Africa that may influence our thinking:

*A missionary watched the strange behavior of a Bedouin who time and again lies absolutely flat on the ground, pressing his ear into the sand of the desert. The missionary asks amazed: “What are you doing?” The Bedouin answers: “Friend, I hear the desert crying. It wants to be a garden.”*

What can this story tell each of us with regard to our personal lives, the life of our Congregation? Is there maybe something “crying” in us because it is longing to be a “garden”? As the desert became for Israel the birthplace as the people of Yahweh, so also in every personal and common experience of the desert new life can be born. “Mourning will be transformed into joy, lamenting into dancing, isolation into community, rigidity into fundamental change, holding on into letting go, narrowness into wideness, falling silent into rejoicing, escape routes into ways home.”(Margarete Niggemeyer)

I want to add to this letter some reflections “my” prisoner LaRoyce L. Smith shared with me in his letter of December 14, 2006. For 15 years he has been in the “desert” of a prison for doomed men in Texas. His thoughts are remarkable: *“I have been on death row for 15 years and I have been discovering and developing myself, my inner self and spirit and I learnt that it starts in the mind and reflects down to the heart. Being in prison can be one of the most degrading experiences in life. It seems that degradation is the main purpose of prison.* (Remark: here he mentions some practices that are so inhuman that I don’t want to write them down here). *Having a strong mind helps one to survive the rigors of prison and life. Prison is a negative place. Probably some of the most negative thinking on the planet takes place inside the prisons. There are many broken people in prison. They have failed in life because they never really try to think positive. I tell guys to never count themselves among the losses. By keeping a positive outlook you will have the advantage in any situation. It can be quite difficult. Having a strong belief in yourself is vitally important. You must believe in yourself, that you can change your condition, that you can be a better human being. You must believe in yourself, because hardly anyone else will. How you see yourself determines how you see the world and others. This is why I think positive about everything in my life and that surrounds me and I always try to look for the best in every situation.”*

Dear Sisters, these lines do not need a commentary, they speak for themselves and complement my letter in a way which can make us think very deeply. Here we have a sample of how the acceptance of the “desert” can transform a person.

Information:

- Today I can send you the names of the Sisters who have been elected as delegates to the General Chapter:

German Province:

Sister Anna Schwanz

Sister Renate Rautenbach

Sister Christhild Neuheuser

Sister Gregoris Michels will participate in the General Chapter as Ex-Officio-Member.

Alternate Delegates are Sister Maria Ancilla König and Sister Rita Kellner.

N.A. Western Province:

Sister Juliana Miska

Sister Monica Cormier

Sister Janice Boyer

Alternate Delegates are Sister Carol Bredenkamp and Sister Caroline Schafer.

N.A. Eastern Province:

Sister Mary Edward Spohrer

Sister Joanne Bednar

Sister Diane Moughan

Alternate Delegates are Sister Josita Marks and Sister Maria Assumpta Shurer.

Chilean Province:

Sister Flavia Pérez

Sister María de los Angeles Carrera

Sister Maristella Schmidlin

Alternate Delegates are Sister Rebeca Yáñez and Sister María Cecilia Añazco.

Uruguayan-Argentinean Province:

Sister María Angelina Rivarola

Sister Celina Raquel Ladrón de Guevara

Sister Mariana Mateo

Alternate Delegates are Sister María Adriana Mateos and Sister María Graciela Nuñez

Philippine Unit:

Sister Theresia Barkey

- On January 15, I received from our Postulator a copy of the Decree declaring the validity of the Diocesan process of Mother Pauline's "Causa." This Decree is an important step forward because only now can the study of the alleged miracle continue here in Rome. The concrete examination of the case is at first carried out separately by two medical doctors. When at least one of them gives a positive vote the case will be forwarded to the "Consulta," which is composed of five specialists. When three of the five give a positive report all documents are given to the theological consulters. When two thirds of the consulters' votes are positive the "Causa" goes for discussion to the Cardinals and Bishops. Only when these agree to the alleged miracle will it be presented to the Holy Father. I can assure you that Pope Benedict XVI is very interested in Mother Pauline's "Causa." So you see, dear Sisters, that we still have a long way to accompany the "Causa" of Mother Pauline not only by our prayers but also especially by our life as SCC's in today's world

I wish all of us a Lent during which the Spirit can drive us into the “desert,” so that we let go of our misleading securities and are ready to go with Jesus the way of conversion, which is always a conversion to love.

In gratitude, your

*Sr. Adalberto*