

The Wilderness, II

It is most helpful when going into the wilderness to remember that God does not have to do anything I think He should do. Atheists like to point out that if God is all we say He is, then He will have to save everyone. Our response should be simple: "If He is God, He doesn't *have* to do anything."

When leaving the power and control of city life behind and entering the wilderness it is good to remember that God is capable of raining fire and brimstone upon cities given over to sodomy (Ex. 20:5); that He punishes children for the sins of their fathers, even to the third and fourth generations (Num.14:18), that He lets the good suffer and the evil seemingly go unpunished (Ps. 73). At the same time it is good to remember that not even a sparrow can fall without His knowing it, that Christ is the living revelation of the Father, and so to see Christ heal the infirm, or weep at the death of a friend, or to see Him eating and drinking with sinners in overwhelming forgiveness and forbearance...the wilderness is a place to confront the mystery of God – and especially of how little we understand Him.

And like so many characters in the Scriptures, our reaction to this mystery might not be what we think it should be. The psalmist roars his anger against the Almighty in many psalms; Ecclesiasticus bitterly laments the injustice and futility of life, and our Savior cried out from the cross *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabactani*. My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

But as you confront or ponder the mystery of God, again I say we must remember what St. Paul called the *world rulers of darkness*, the devils. Look up at the mystery of God, and you will begin to make progress in your journey to Him. And our enemies will take notice and try to thwart the progress. How? The same way they did when Christ was in the wilderness. Satan placed temptations before our Lord trying to show all kinds of stuff in a light that makes sin appear good, attractive, and even wonderful. God's goal in leading His elect into the wilderness is to strengthen their faith. Satan's goal is to damage that faith by getting us to disobey the law of God, and thus to destroy our fellowship with the Lord, and thus to steal our destiny and our blessings.

This he tries to accomplish by sending temptations of confusion, irritation, frustration and above all discouragement. He wants us to shift our thoughts from God to ourselves, so that we can become more self-centered, going back to control and power, and make things happen by our own strength and not the strength of faith or hope or charity. He wants us to shift our thought to the problems and storms around us, just as long as we do not focus on God. So if we are to come out of the wilderness with victory, then we need to follow the example of Christ in how He gained victory over the enemy when He was in the wilderness.

But before I speak of His fight, I mentioned to the young men on my recent expedition in Wyoming that despite so many temptations, have you noticed that you are not succumbing to them? They agreed, and wondered why. The answer is straightforward good habits. We got up early each day. I was usually up well before the others to begin the Divine Office. Getting out of a warm sleeping bag into 30 degree weather isn't easy, but it was virtuous. Then after the lads woke up, prayers were said, breakfast cooked and utensils cleaned, and the first class taught on map reading or compass orientation to plan the day's hike, and then break camp so we could be hiking by 830 AM. Then a day of hiking, more classes, set up camp, Holy Mass, cook dinner, review of the day, prayers, and then some down time in front of a fire for good conversation. From start to finish we were not idle. This takes away a huge instrument of the Enemy. Idleness is his workshop.

Secondly, we were in the company of good Catholic men. Isolation is another weapon of the enemy, and this was taken away from him too.

Thirdly, we were separate from electronic entertainments, so the lads had to make their own music and boy were they good at it. We sang many good songs and recited good poetry. The unreality of virtual reality is a tool of the enemy and this too was taken away from him.

Fourthly, our senses were filled with the things that God had made – and so His order, His sense of beauty, His goodness and especially reality was part of our daily bread.

Lastly, we prayed all day off and on, daily Mass, frequent confession, daily rosary while hiking and engaged in good conversation about our holy Faith. It's really hard to fall into sin when you are doing those things.

But it is possible. What I outlined briefly is largely exterior isn't it. Yet the struggle for mastery over sin is largely interior. To learn how to gain the mastery interiorly we must turn to the Master of the interior life, and understand what He did when He was in the wilderness.

First, he submitted completely to the will of God and the plan God had for his life. Second, He had complete and utter trust in the Word of God. When He was tempted, He did not respond with fears, or doubts, or worries, or unbelief. All of those things help give the enemy a foothold.

Third, He received the temptations while at peace. This confounds the enemy, who cannot understand why someone might praise and worship God in the midst of trial and difficulty. It transcends logic and goes into the realm of grace, which eternally frustrates the enemy. He will never understand what St. Paul said about this in the epistle to the Philippians, "And the peace of God, which surpasseth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (4.7)

In the novel by George Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, the devil is described by the old monsignor as being locked in a room with several shelves of large diamonds. He takes one down and on it is written *Obedience*. He scratches and bites and slams it against the wall for hours, and then puts it back and in frustration takes down another one named *Peace* and does the same thing and then takes down another one called *Chastity*. No matter how hard he tries to break in and damage these, it always ends in frustration and rage, and he goes back to another diamond over and over forever.

Confidence in the Word of God – in His revelation – lets the enemy know that we refuse to exchange the truth of God for the lies of hell. This union with God is our strength. Our submission to His Word overwhelms the enemy and causes him to flee from us like he fled from our Lord in the wilderness. As St. James puts it in his epistle, "Be subject therefore to God, but resist the devil, and he will fly from you." (James 4.7)