

Brothers and Sisters,

Up until my recent assignment as the Rector of the Cathedral, my entire priesthood had been lived in the *desert*. And, while I never got accustomed to the 120° summers, I am grateful to God for sending me to the one place I that I never wanted to go. I've always found it interesting that we refer to certain areas of our Diocese as "the desert", since a *true* desert is a place of isolation—where we see and hear nothing. Because of the desert's uninhabitable conditions, it tends to be a place difficult to survive. But it's precisely this place that has been at the heart of spiritual renewal. The desert has seen great saints have profound encounters with God. The rich wisdom of our Desert Fathers is among the foundations of our Christian Spiritual Tradition. Wonderful surprises can be found in the desert silence—which isn't really silent at all. It's simply an environment free of distraction and stimulation. A place where we can begin to listen more deeply to what's *really* going on. Lent is our invitation into the desert: a spiritual journey to a place of peace and scarcity.

Lent is our forty-day call to live simpler, more reflective lives in order to confront the demons that bind us to our weaknesses and imperfections. "Jesus remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him" (Mk 1:13). These weaknesses weigh us down and make life much heavier than it has to be. By choosing to limit our distractions, obsessions, illusions, dependencies, and insecurities for forty days, we are able to be more self-aware and free. But preparing for our time in the desert requires honesty and a willingness to grow and change. It means more than just giving up things like chocolate, coffee, or wine for a time. If our sacrifices are not accompanied by reflection, prayer, and perseverance, we will return to our former lives at the end of these forty days. The success of our Lenten journey depends on our acknowledgement that God is always faithful to His promises. His covenant must mean something to us if we want to find value in our Lenten practices.

The same God who created and fashioned us in love, is the One who makes a timeless covenant with us. "Christ suffered for sins once...that he might lead you to God" (1 Pt 3:18). It is He whom we find in the silence of the desert when we peel away the superficialities of life and learn to live the joy of simplicity. The desert gives us the courage to seek what's truly important. Here we begin to rely more on the inner strength that comes from God over the minimal and passing comforts that the world can provide. Transformed by the challenges in the desert, we can become more credible witnesses—not of what the world can do for us—but, what God can do and is doing in our lives! Let us be persistent in praying that this Lent will be holy and transforming.

Peace,
Fr. Alex