

# What if we went into the desert?

Letter to our  
brethren

APRIL 2026

What if we went into the desert?

Dear brothers and sisters in the Pious Schools, we do not need to go far: it is enough to dare, for a moment, to leave behind the noise that surrounds us, including the noise within ourselves, to enter that space where what is secondary disappears and what is essential reappears.

At its core, **Lent** is exactly that: **an invitation into the desert.**

Yet the desert is not only a place; **it is also a call that can be heard.** Sometimes it emerges as an inner need, almost imperceptible: the weariness caused by noise, the intuition that we need to pause... At other times it comes through mediation: a word, the Gospel, a prompting in prayer, or a person who invites us...

The spiritual life may mature when we stop resisting the desert and begin to desire it. When we no longer enter it simply because we have no alternative, but because we recognise it as a necessary space and time. **Then the desert ceases to be an imposition and becomes a choice.**

A desert that is not absence, but presence; not sterility, but what is essential; not escape, but journey; not emptiness, but encounter.

The Gospel reminds us forcefully: Jesus does not choose the desert as a comfortable refuge, but *is led there himself*<sup>1</sup> (Mk 1:12). There are moments in life when we do not choose to enter the desert, but life itself, or God Himself, leads us there.

### The desert: the place where God speaks to the heart.

In the biblical tradition, the desert is not merely a geographical location; it is a spiritual space: the place of the covenant, the gentle breeze, and also of trial.

The **prophet Hosea** expresses this with extraordinary beauty: *I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart* (Hos 2:16).

The Hebrew word for desert is **midbar**. Here, a valuable insight emerges: *midbar* shares its root<sup>2</sup> with *dabar*, which means *word or speech*. The desert, therefore, is not a place of emptiness, but a place where everything can become *word*.

When distractions and haste subside, and the external voices that overwhelm us fall silent, a quieter yet truer voice begins to emerge. In the desert, what previously went unnoticed starts to speak: a sense of unease, an unresolved question, a genuine desire, even a wound. And, gradually, God as well. Not because He was absent before, but because now He no longer has to compete with anything. Then all of reality becomes meaningful; what we experience, what we feel, what happens to us... everything can become *Word*, that is, a place of encounter, of calling, of meaning. The desert does not create that voice, but it makes it audible. For this reason it is a place of grace, because **it restores our capacity to listen**.

### The virtues of the desert: a theophany

The desert teaches through its own virtues.

**Silence:** not the absence of sound, but a space for listening.

1.- Mk 1:12: Immediately afterwards, the Spirit drove him into the desert.

2.- Midbar, the Hebrew term for *desert*, shares the same root as *dabar*, which means *word*. With the prefix *Mi-*, often used to indicate a place, the desert becomes the *place of the word*.

**Truth:** without masks to maintain; what is present appears as it is.

**Essentiality:** it teaches us to distinguish, as a basic principle of wisdom, what is necessary from what is superfluous.

**Patience:** the desert is in no hurry; it imposes a different rhythm and acceptance of processes.

**Wonder at what is small:** a shadow, a drop of water, a blade of grass... In the desert, what is small ceases to be insignificant and becomes a sign of life.

Perhaps this is the most important virtue: **theophany — God becomes God again**. In the desert, God is not confused with our ideas, plans, or securities. God is God. As with Elijah, who sought Him in the spectacular but found Him in a *gentle breeze* (1 Kgs 19:12). The desert also purifies our image of God.

### The desert, today

Not all of us can travel to the desert, but all of us can enter it, which is often an **inner conquest**.

**For the youngest**, the desert can be something as simple — and as difficult — as switching off the mobile for a while, walking without music, being without constant stimuli, and learning to be with oneself, free from dependencies. In a world that never stops offering noise, distraction and comparison, silence can even feel a little vertiginous, because within it, feelings appear that we do not always know how to name. But it is precisely there that something true begins, when one dares, little by little, to inhabit one's own interior.

For a **Piarist**, the desert can mean once again caring for genuine times of prayer, not only functional or hurried ones; making space for silence beyond intense apostolic activity; setting aside time for retreat, however brief; and not filling every empty space with tasks. There is a real risk of living turned outwards, generously given over, but with no room to allow God to speak to us within. Yet mission is sustained from there. The desert does not draw us away from self-giving; rather, it roots it and makes it more sincere and robust.

**For a community**, the desert can mean creating spaces of shared silence, not fearing moments without words, and discerning without haste or noise. When a community dares to enter into silence and wait together... something changes. The shared desert can become a place of deeper communion.

### **What noise is preventing you today from hearing what is essential?**

It hardly needs to be said, though it is worth recalling, that none of this relates to **laziness** or a convenient way of evading responsibility. The desert is not a refuge for those unwilling to become involved, nor an excuse to empty life of commitment; it is not a superficial withdrawal or wasted time. Rather, it is a demanding space where one encounters oneself, God, and the truth of one's own mission. For that reason, it must not be confused with carelessness or inertia. The true desert does not draw us away from life; instead, it prepares us to live it with greater depth, fidelity, and self-giving.

### **Desert and mission**

**Blaise Pascal**, always so lucid, reminds us that *all the unhappiness of men comes from one single thing: not knowing how to remain at rest in a room*<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps today we might express it differently: we do not know how to dwell in the desert. Silence is difficult for us, and emptiness makes us uncomfortable.

In this context, it is worth considering certain contemporary essays, such as *On God. Thinking with Simone Weil* by **Byung-Chul Han**<sup>4</sup>, where, in dialogue with the great French thinker, we are invited to rediscover the value of silence, emptiness, and attention as ways to recover meaning amid a life saturated with noise and stimuli.

But it is in **Saint Joseph Calasanz** that this intuition reaches a depth that is particularly illuminating for us. In one of his letters he writes: *I greatly*

3.- Pascal, *Thoughts (Pensées)*, fragment 139 (Brunschvicg edition): *Tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne pas savoir demeurer en repos dans une chambre.* [All the unhappiness of men comes from one thing: not knowing how to remain at rest in a room.]

4.- Han, Byung-Chul, *Sobre Dios. Pensar con Simone Weil [On God. Thinking with Simone Weil]* (Barcelona: Herder, 2023).

*approve that he withdraw, with one or two companions, to make spiritual exercises in a place far from the conversation of men, in order to deal only with God, and that Martha and Mary be together.*<sup>5</sup> It is not simply a matter of alternating contemplation and action, as though they were two separate times, but of learning to live them in unity. In our dealings with God, in that sought and inhabited desert, there gradually takes shape a way of being in the mission that is born neither of efficiency nor of urgency, but of a recollected and rightly ordered heart. *This holding together of Martha and Mary* creates the inner unity that sustains life and mission. The desert is not, therefore, a parenthesis in self-giving, but its deepest source, the place where we learn to be with God in order truly to be with others.

The desert is not the end of the journey. Jesus returns from it to begin his mission. This *erēmos*, as found in the Gospel, means *solitary, uninhabited*, apparently desolate, and yet in biblical experience, it becomes a place of encounter with God. For this reason, it does not distance us from the world, **but prepares us to inhabit it more fully**. Jesus withdraws to pray and returns ready to give himself, to hand himself over. Here, the Christian paradox is revealed: what appears empty becomes fullness.

Perhaps, as Piarists, we may rediscover today that this task has a very specific name: *evangelisation*, and that it involves **learning how to enter the desert** and helping others to do the same. We know, from experience, that these spaces and times are profoundly necessary, both for children and young people and for ourselves; therefore, it is a matter of educating in interiority, of accompanying pupils and young people so that they do not live constantly in noise, and of offering them, and ourselves, moments of silence, meaning and searching. Creating these small experiences can be a simple and concrete way of caring for ourselves and sustaining what we are called to live. For, following the path of Jesus, the movement does not stop there, but goes from the *erēmos* to the world; a *converted* heart returns and inhabits reality in a new way.

5.- Opera Omnia, vol. 5, p. 301, letter of 15 November 1635.

Good Father, lead us into the desert and  
speak to our hearts.

Remove the noise that distracts us,

teach us to listen to Your voice in the silence,

and grant that we may return to our lives with  
attentive hearts.

Amen

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