

Desert: reality and metaphor

*Leonardo Boff, Theologian-Philosopher
Earth Charter Commission*

The desert is both a mysterious reality, and a deep metaphor for the contradictory course of human life.

40% of the Earth's surface is presently in advanced stages of being turned into desert. The deserts grow at a rate of 60,000 square kilometers a year, the equivalent of 12 hectares per minute. In Brazil, a million square kilometers are in the process of becoming desertified, including 180,000 square kilometers in the North-East and in Minas alone. This phenomenon, which threatens crops, thus causing hunger and emigration of entire populations, results from deforestation, poor use of the soil, climate change and the winds.

Let us remember that ten thousand years ago, the Nile flowed through the Sahara desert into the Atlantic, and it was covered with dense tropical jungles. It is now the largest desert in the world, with an area larger than Brazil (9,065,000 square km), many dinosaur fossils, and the ruins of ancient civilizations. Then, however, the climate changed drastically, transforming it into an immense savannah, and later, into an arid and extremely dry desert. Is that not a warning for the Amazon jungle?

But life is always stronger. It resists, adapts and triumphs in the end. Life still exists in the deserts: including more than 800 species of plants, minuscule insects, and animals. It suffices that a more humid wind blows, or a few drops of water fall, and the invisible life erupts in splendour.

In eight days, seeds germinate, then flowers mature and yield fruit that falls to the ground. The seeds are preserved. They can lie dormant for more than a year, enduring the heavy heat of the sun and the scourge of the winds, until they can germinate, and continue the uninterrupted and triumphant cycle of life. Other shrubs shrink into themselves, curling up to escape the wind, and to survive.

Similarly, small animals feed on insects, butterflies, dragonflies and seeds carried by the wind.

But where there is an oasis, nature seems to get even: the green is greener, the atmosphere more cheerful, and the fruits have more vibrant colors. They all proclaim the victory of life.

With technology, the human being opens the deserts, building great highways, and returns the desert to civilization, such as occurs in the United States, China and Chile. This is the reality of the ecology of the external desert.



But there are internal deserts, also with a profound ecology. Every human being has a desert that must be walked through in search of a «promised land». It is a painful journey, filled with mirages. But always an oasis awaits, to remake that human being.

There are deserts and deserts: deserts of the senses, of the spirit, of faith. The desert of the senses occurs especially in interpersonal relations. After a few years, the relationship of a couple experiences the desert of the day to day monotony and the diminution of mutual enchantment. If there is no creativity or acceptance of each other's limits, the relationship can end. If the journey is not undertaken, the discouraging desert remains.

There is also the desert of the spirit. In the IV century, when Christianity began to become bourgeois, some lay Christians decided to maintain alive the dream of Jesus of Nazareth. They went to the desert to find the promised land in their own souls, and to find God, naked and alive. And they found God. It is about a dangerous journey through the desert. Saint John of the Cross speaks of the "terrible and dreadful" night of the spirit. But the result is a radical integration. Consequently, from the aridity, the lost paradise is born. The desert is a metaphor for this search and this encounter. Finally, there is the desert of faith. Today, the Roman Catholic Church is experiencing an arid desert, because the spring born of Vatican Council II was transformed into a severe winter, by means of the measures taken by the central organ of the Vatican in its effort to maintain tradition and piety; styles suitable to the medieval model of a Church of power. The Church responds to the calls arising from the people like a besieged and shuttered fortress, closed to their laments and hope. It is a model of a Church of fear, suspicion and a poverty of creativity, that reveals a lack of faith and trust in the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. The opposite of faith is not atheism, but fear. A Church filled with fear loses her main substance, that is, the living faith. The pedophile crimes of many persons of the cloth, and the financial scandals of the Vatican Bank, have led many of the faithful to experience the desert, to emigrate from the institution, even though they maintain the dream of the Poor Carpenter of Nazareth, and their faithfulness to the Gospels. We live in an ecclesiastic desert, without even a glimpse of an oasis ahead. It will be our challenge to undertake the journey in spite of everything, with the certainty that the Spirit will burst forth and make flowers appear in the desert. But, oh, how it hurts!

Leonardo Boff <<http://leonardoboff.com/>>

11-09-2012