

## Sabbatical

March 15, 2020

Since the day after Christmas, I have been on a much needed sabbatical from my duties at the parish and from my added responsibilities in Canon Law. On March 9th, I returned to the parish to resume my duties as pastor and to get ready for the Diocesan Tribunal's opening on July 1 of this year, for which I will be the Judicial Vicar. As I come back into the swing of things, I would like to relate to you what I have been doing during this time. First, I started out my time with a Christmas season family reunion in Louisiana centered around my 89-year-old grandfather. It was wonderful to be able to reconnect for a few days and spend some time with my siblings and cousins, running through the woods in which I grew up. Then, the day before New Year's Day 2020, I made my way to the High Desert of Northern New Mexico to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, where I spent the majority of my time on this sabbatical. More on that in just a bit. In the middle of my time at the monastery I had the privilege of going on pilgrimage to the Holy Land with people from our Diocese. Fr. Dowling from St. Augustine and I were the chaplains. It was led by noted Catholic author and speaker Steve Ray. If you haven't already, check out his great video content on the FORMED app. He has a great series called "The Footprints of God" that traces many of the steps I visited on my pilgrimage. This was the second Holy Land Pilgrimage I have done with Steve Ray, and this time we went for a "deeper dive" and explored parts of the Holy Land that people rarely get to see. For instance, we started in the Kingdom of Jordan. We went to Nablus (Shechem) and Hebron in the West Bank, and we got up on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This will be a source of future pastor's notes, for sure.

As for my time at the Monastery, what a privileged time it was, indeed! My main goal during this sabbatical was to reconnect with the interior life and ground myself once more in prayer. I remember fondly the days of seminary when we frequently went on retreats, prayed together the Liturgy of the Hours and in general lived a common life in the Lord. After 15 years in the field since those days, I could sense my flagging enthusiasm and tiredness for the spiritual things that are so necessary for the life of ministry. If a priest is not a man of prayer, he is simply a hired functionary. But a priest is supposed to be a collaborator in the Truth and a companion of the Lamb of God. This means we are supposed to have an intimate life with Him through constant prayer. What I have discovered is that with all the emphasis on the active life—with appointments and schedules and bills and administrative duties—diocesan priests are rarely allowed to experience this most essential contemplative side of their identity and vocation. It is like we are all Martha and no Mary (Luke 10). But the reality that Jesus exhorts Martha to is that Mary, the contemplative, has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken from her. If we don't stay focused on Jesus, we will quickly lose our way.

So my goal during this sabbatical was simply to reconnect with God through an intense and exclusive focus on the interior life. I did that by means of disconnecting from the world - technology, e-mail, phone, entertainment, and all that distracts the soul from focusing solely on God. I apologize to anyone who tried to get in touch with me during that time and couldn't or felt that I was ignoring them. I wasn't ignoring, but rather attending to you in a different way. In fact, I kept a special intention for each of the hours of prayer and the parish and parishioners of Sts. Peter and Paul were rarely far from my thoughts. But what a gift it was to be "unplugged" for two and a half months. We don't realize how tied we are to these artificial stimuli of our modern world till they are gone. However, to get seated solidly in the interior life, this unplugging is so very necessary. The art of praying is something that is being lost on modern man because he doesn't give enough time to it, isn't comfortable enough with the silence it takes, and is too distracted to stay still with it. To pray, one has to have silence enough to hear one's thoughts, time enough to examine them, and a trained will strong enough to be still with them before the Lord. Then, within the thoughts of the heart, we discover the deeper dwelling of God in the soul.



Now, I can't say that after two and a half months I have somehow become a guru or spiritual master—far from it! Indeed, what was revealed was how very far behind I truly am! But what I can say is that it has been a very fruitful time of prayer. The analogy for my experience lay right outside the window of my little cabin. I lived in a hermitage on the edge of the Chama River, a five minute walk to the Abbey. When I got there at the New Year, the river was frozen over and snow was collecting on top of it. In a way, my heart had also grown cold over the years and wasn't flowing the way it was supposed to. However, by the time I left, all the ice on the river had melted away, and the ducks and geese swam freely up and down the river once again. So too, my heart has melted and I experienced the renewal of God's warmth and love in prayer. For that I can say, "Mission Accomplished!" But there is so much more to do! I pray that this jumpstart in the middle of my priestly life may bear fruit in the years to come as I return to the Lord's vineyard.



Rev. J. David Carter