

Roquefort cheese, you may know, is a blue cheese made from sheep-milk from the south of France, but what you may not know is that not just any blue cheese made from sheep-milk can be legally labeled Roquefort. To qualify for that name, the cheese must be made entirely from the milk of the Lacaune breed of sheep and matured in the natural caves near the town of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon in the Aveyron region of France, where it is colonized by the fungus *Penicillium roqueforti* that grows in these caves.

And who says so? The European Union, no less. In fact, the EU has designation schemes that enable products to be placed on its protected food-name register. Goods like cheese, wine, chocolate, honey and several others are eligible for this register if they meet certain standards. One of the designation schemes is the Protected Geographical Indication, usually abbreviated as PGI.

But there's more than legality involved. People say they can taste a difference between genuine Roquefort and other blue cheeses. And matters of taste are not limited to French foodstuffs. There's a difference between say, a good California wine and a good New York wine, between maple syrup from Ohio and from Vermont, between potatoes from Idaho and those from Maine. Same for "Vidalia Onions" and "California Raisins." All of them may be good products, but many people say they can detect a difference, and thus, protecting the unique characteristics of foods from a specific area is worth the effort.

If the location in which a food or drink is produced can influence its taste, *might location ever have a bearing on the depth of our spiritual life?* Our Scripture reading tells us that immediately after his baptism by John in the Jordan River, Jesus was driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he was both tempted by Satan and ministered to by angels.

In fact, three of the four gospels tell of Jesus being in the wilderness for 40 days, with Matthew and Luke giving more detail. Mark, however, just tells us that it happened and gives us a sense of its significance to Jesus' life and work.

The focus of three gospels on Jesus' time in the wilderness suggests that the *location* was a crucible that shaped his subsequent ministry and confirmed for him what needed to be protected in his life.

We are here on the first Sunday in Lent, and it's not hard to say that spiritually speaking, there are things of the Spirit that we might gain *from some form of retreat, some change of location*, if only for a few hours, where you can have some PGI time, as it were. *Protected God Interaction.*

You may have gotten some sense of this if you've ever gone on a church mission trip that took you into an unfamiliar setting and culture. Many people return from such experiences with a new viewpoint and a heightened spirituality. The same thing can happen during a church retreat or even a vacation that takes you away from your routine. And it need not be an extended jaunt. Some of my favorite local places are Tohono Chul Park, Madera Canyon, San Javier del Bac (Dove of the Desert), and Agua Caliente Park.

One thing that we can notice as we read in the gospels about Jesus' ministry is that while he never took another 40-day retreat, he frequently withdrew from the crowds and often even from the disciples to pray, and he usually sought out a deserted place to do his praying, perhaps as a link to his wilderness experience. In the gospels, there are several mentions of his praying in deserted places.

+ Matthew and John both tell us that after teaching a crowd all day and then performing the miracle of feeding the 5,000, he dismissed the crowds and "went up the mountain by himself to pray" (Matthew 14:23; cf. John 6:15).

+ Mark reports that Jesus had spent a day preaching and healing people. The next morning, "while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed" (1:35). That was our Gospel lesson just the other week.

Mostly, what Jesus gives us about prayer is his own example, which, most of the time, is to withdraw to a deserted place to do it, and there are a few things this teaches us.

For one thing, it suggests that *we need to be intentional about finding a time and place to pray and listen*. And it helps to be organized and systematic about it so praying doesn't get forgotten or neglected.

Jesus' practice of retreat can also help us think about *the deserted places in our lives*. For many of us, deserted places do not refer so much to physical locations as to parts of our lives to which we forget to invite God. A woman who had a long commute by car to her job every workday said that those 50 minutes she spent in the car each day seemed like wasted time.

Then one day she began using it for prayer. Obviously, she didn't shut her eyes or try to read the Bible, but she did turn off the radio and tried to lay out before God the things that were on her heart. She didn't spend all her time in the car that way, but she said she found an enrichment of her spiritual life beginning to take place.

Deserted places can also refer to *places where we lack what others have*. Not much is known about William Walford who wrote the words to "Sweet Hour of Prayer" in 1842. We do know that he was a minister who lived in England and was totally blind. Perhaps his hymn grew out of his experience with living in a world where the ability to see had deserted him.

Further, deserted places can refer to times *during which we suddenly feel alone because of temptations or rage or discouragement or doubt or some other inward experience*. Those are times to pray. They are the deserted places of our lives, and filling them with prayer -- even if only a brief call to God -- can change the complexion of the experience in a way that brings us more in line with God's will.

There's a letter written a few years back by the late Jacques Maritain, a Catholic philosopher, to a 17-year-old girl. We don't know who she was, but apparently, she'd been raised in the church but then found herself in a deserted place where, because of something that happened, she felt she had lost God. She was angry about it and had written to Maritain.

In writing back, Maritain appealed for her to use every ounce of her intelligence and suggested some things to read. Then he added: "I am not telling you to wait, I am telling you rather to take advantage of the fact that you are completely broken and beaten to the ground in order to set yourself to a real search for truth -- putting your childhood behind you ... I am not telling you to wait -- *I am telling you to pray* as best you can, blaspheming perhaps, groping and stammering. Tell [God], 'If you exist, make yourself known to me.'"

I began by referring to the European Union's effort to offer protected status to various food products. Their PGI designation provides that protection. I close by reminding you that our souls and our spiritual health are worth protecting. Often, our spirit is revived and strengthened by finding a setting where it can best grow and develop. At any time when existence weighs upon us so that we feel we are in a deserted place, we can and should pray.

The example of Jesus shows us that prayer can turn the deserted places into PGI time. Then, when we get to those bad spots, we are not simply getting reacquainted with God, but turning to the One who has been making the divine known to us all along.

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