DIMENSIONS OF CREATIVE SOLITUDE

By JOHN NAVONE

MAN MUST HAVE creative solitude if he is to contribute something of value to others. Although a man may have many advisers, his decision-making is basically a solitary act through which he effects the scope and shape of his personhood. The kind of world he lives in will be determined by his response to the transcendental imperatives, 'Be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible and loving, develop and, if necessary, change', which enforce a radical openness to the horizons of all and every true meaning. No one can make his judgments and decisions for him. He stands alone in determining what kind of person he will become.

The christian mystery is prototypical of creative solitude. Human renewal is achieved through Christ's anguished withdrawal in death and his glorious return in the resurrection. Christ is sent by his Father to effect a new creation; and he returns to the Father as the first of many sons. His creative solitude has a social impact. It gives new meaning to man's painful sense of distance from earthly 'fatherlands', none of which satisfy the longing for the genuine fatherland, where all men will live as brothers at peace with themselves, their neighbours and their God.

Paradoxically, creative solitude is necessary for society. Genuine advances in self-transcendence demand a departure from the familiar assumptions of man's prior stage of development. In response to a transcendent call, Abraham left his home, his 'earthly fatherland', and struck out in faith for an unknown land. This rupture in faith from the familiar seems essential for his becoming the father of many children. His self-transcendence leads to the creation of a people.

There is a kind of solitude out of which have risen the works of creative artists and writers. It is a solitude which helps man accomplish his task of eradicating the cruder limits of his finiteness through knowledge and decision. With labour and patience the limits of finiteness can be expanded; and one generation can resolve the problems under which the former age had suffered. Creative solitude helps man put the world in order. Man only slowly learns to attack the real problems before him. He must first learn to cope with his own life; and creative solitude is necessary for this.

If we think that solitude is due, with no further qualification, to human evil and not also to human finiteness, then we will finish by calling the human condition as such evil. We will probably revolt at being men at all, since that involves in part the recognition of our finiteness as good: not an absolute good, but a good nonetheless.

There is a darkness about the world of the spirit which entails solitude.

When man reflects, no matter how bright the day, he finds himself in the darkness of the world of the spirit. He is born in darkness, he lives in darkness, he dies in darkness. He is a mystery to himself. He seems to be made for some great and glorious destiny. He is conscious of a great emptiness awaiting fulfilment. But what is that destiny? How is it to be fulfilled? If he puzzles out in some dim way the general direction to take, the life of virtue, the good life, his steps are slow and hesitating, his decisions doubtful, his progress subject to continual backsliding. On the basis of christian faith we know that man's reason is capable of discovering obligations which his will seems powerless to fulfil. (If all this seems foreign to our own experience, we have to recall that a christian education has provided us with many answers before the questions have had a chance to occur, and its temporary effect is to lull our native reflectiveness into repose.)

Solitude enters into the theology of renunciation. Karl Rahner affirms that a prerequisite of specifically christian renunciation is that the values renounced be of the highest intra-mundane worth, and that their intrinsic value should not be depreciated in any way. The renunciation must be such that there can be no justifying reason for it within the created order of things. Renunciation becomes a real-symbolic gesture which engages the existence of the person making it. This gesture implies a stand towards the world which requires as the condition of its possibility a real faith, hope and love for the transcendent destiny of man revealed in Jesus Christ. This destiny is not only to come (eschatological), but is now present through God's communication of himself in grace. Renunciation is a response to the world which affirms man's belief in the offered presence of the transcendent, personal God, one in which the christian discovers how seriously he does take God, and where God becomes 'more real' to him in and by his action. Rahner believes that if love for the world is to be christian witness, it must be such that it does not make sense without faith. The consequent solitude is that of those who are in the world but not of it.

The cross remains the symbol of christianity, even if it is resented by those who accuse christianity of ridiculous optimism or stupid pessimism. Christians seem to ignore progress and suffering, accepting both with a complacency that often exasperates others. To be symbolized by a naked man tortured on a cross seems masochistic and sadistic to many moderns. Both these divergent criticisms of christianity agree that all the happiness that is possible for man is here and now. They do not share the same future as christians: the profane does not mediate the sacred for them; it cannot be transcended. The christian believes in a future that will be absolutely new, something which eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive. Such a belief suggests pure nonsense or wish-thought to non-believers. In this respect the world renounces the christian and his future. It does not share the same hopes. A type of cultural *anomie*, or solitude, is enforced upon christians by a world whose media and culture reject the christian vision of man and his future.

The christian accepts this solitude because of his belief that his destiny is to be more than man; it is to be like God, to live like God, sharing a life which eye has not seen nor ear heard, a life which it has not entered into the heart of man to conceive. It is a destiny beyond human understanding because it is measured by God himself, and the measure of God is to be without measure.

The solitude of christians is never absolute. The christian is aware of his gift of the Spirit of Jesus, of the love that prompts and moulds all his thoughts and feelings, all his judgments and decisions. That dynamic state effected by the gift of the Spirit is a first principle in the christian's living, the origin and source of the lovingness that colours his every thought, word, deed and omission. It is this love which makes christian solitude creative, and precludes that it should ever become absolute.

The christian believes that the Spirit introduces us into the human relationship of sons and brothers with the Father; this belief elucidates the role of the moral law in our lives. The very presence of the Spirit effects in our lives the likeness of Jesus Christ, which consists in obedience to the Father. This obedience takes the form of faith, in hearing his word; of love, responsiveness to and rest in his truth; and, because this love is not yet consummated, of hope, the desire always to live in his love. Our faith, hope and love are evidence of that active presence of the Spirit which precludes christian solitude from being absolute.

At the same time, there is that 'dark night of the soul' about which the mystics have spoken. This painful dimension of christian solitude recalls Christ's *kenosis*, his 'emptying', his self-examination in the Incarnation, in his positive obedience to the Father through his acceptance of death.[1] In his earthly existence Christ chose not to manifest the glory that is his own by nature (the non-solitude of his trinitarian relationships), and chooses to live the life of a slave for our sake.[2] The suffering involved in this aspect of creative solitude eludes human comprehension, but it does not elude that christian faith which responds affirmatively to the question, 'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and so enter into his glory?'[3]

There is an element of contradiction in the social purpose of creative christian solitude which is illuminated by insights from the theology of hope. Hope contradicts experience; the future, it is hoped, will contradict the present. The experience of solitude apparently and hopefully contradicts its fulfilment in social relevance. Creative christian solitude, like christian hope, is born from contradiction, from the contradiction of the resurrection to the cross. It shares that mission of christian hope to radicalize the existing discrepancy between righteousness and sin, joy and suffering, peace and war, good and evil, life and death, and to look to the absolute future in Christ for a universal and transcendent resolution of this discrepancy in the love of men for one another and for their God.

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[1] Cf Phil 2, 6–11. [2] Cf 2 Cor 6,8–9. [3] Lk 24, 26.

The discipline and loneliness of solitude is ultimately accepted on behalf of friendship. If the law of the cross entails the acceptance of solitude, it does so because solitude is a necessary condition for the achievement of friendship among men and between men and God. All laws, whether human or divine, are ordained to friendship. Aquinas affirms that friendship is the ultimate purpose of all laws:

> As the Apostle says (1 Tim 1,5), the end of the great commandment is charity; since every law aims at establishing friendship, either between man and man, or between man and God, wherefore the whole Law is comprised in this one commandment, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, as expressing the end of all commandments: because love of one's neighbour includes love of God, when we love our neighbour for God's sake.[4]

The solitude of the lonely prophet Jeremiah announced the dereliction of the crucified victim of Calvary. It has the same significance: it signifies the end of an economy in which God's promises and graces were entrusted to Israel *secundum carnem* and communicated by way of generation. This order disappears. When God will raise a new Israel, it will be an Israel *secundum spiritum*, in which one will have access not by right of birth but by direct reception of the Spirit.[5] In such a people the fecundity of the flesh will have lost its value.

Jeremiah had been barred from the Temple,[6] driven from his village,[7] and from the community.[8] He learned before the exile what it would mean to live rejected within his own country and away from Yahweh's sanctuary. He experienced proleptically what his people would later suffer. His celibacy became a sign or an enacted word with an ominous significance which portrayed what Yahweh was about to do: imminent doom and God's judgment which would find its final expression in the cross. His suffering, the solitude of celibacy and rejection, are remembered in the scriptures of his people, because they were ultimately recognized by his people as having an important meaning and value for them. The solitude of Jeremiah builds up his people; it does not exist for its own sake.

By word and deed the solitude of Jeremiah and Jesus generates hope. The way a man behaves or conducts himself indicates what grasp the man has of who and what he is. The behaviour or conduct of Jeremiah and Jesus is the real context or structure of their preaching, the element which throws light on their message. In the message and action of both is implicit an eschatological understanding of their person, which becomes explicit in scripture. In the case of Jesus, it becomes explicit in the kerygma of the primitive Church. By word and deed Jesus generated a hope among his people that he was the

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[4] *Summa Theol.* I–II, q. 99, a. 2, ad 2.
[5] Cf Jer 31, 33–35.
[6] Jer 36, 6.
[7] Jer 11, 8; 12, 6.
[8] Jer 20, 2; 36, 25.

messiah. 'But we hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel'[9] seems to express quite accurately the conviction of the followers of Jesus before his death. But because nothing in the ordinary jewish hopes and expectations was capable of leading the jews to an understanding of the total messianic mystery of Jesus – for example, ordinary categories could not grasp ignominy and suffering as messianic – it is only through the resurrection that the full messianic mystery of Jesus could possibly be disclosed and understood. Messianic hopes that Jesus aroused by his words and deeds were now able to appear in their true light.

The solitude and celibacy of Jeremiah and Jesus incarnate meaning, because men's deeds have word-character. It can be learned from them what they understand of their historical situation. Their deeds express what is in them.

Jesus's prayer, for example, has the aspect of a word-deed. In prayer, Jesus is closest to his Father and the holy Spirit. At such times, leaving aside his disciples, he remains alone united with God. Among men he teaches, he cures, but he is somewhat alone; when alone in prayer he ceases to be a solitary in entering into the society of his equals. From the disciples' point of view, Jesus's solitary prayer is a type of word-deed which tells them about his relationship to God. In Luke's gospel, the public ministry of Jesus opens with the prayer of the Jordan and closes with the prayer of the cross; and all the more important events between are commenced in prayer.

There is a paradoxical aspect to creative christian solitude paradigmatically expressed in Jesus's cry on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'[10] The cry is not, in the jewish sense, an expression of despair. It is the beginning of the twenty-second psalm; it is the prayer of a jew in distress. It does not express an impious revolt, but remains in harmony with the piety of the Old Testament, and expresses consequently a sentiment of communion with God. In reporting this cry of Jesus, it is shown how the Old Testament was realized in the history of Jesus to the very last moment of his life.

Although Jesus dies alone, his cry expresses communion with God. Although the crucifixion appears to be the moment of his destruction, it is the very means God has chosen to effect his new creation. This paradoxical paradigm of creative solitude is based on the tension between history and faith, between nature and grace. For history, Jesus dies alone; for faith, Jesus is in communion with God in the process of inaugurating a new creation. For christian faith, both statements are true (and theology helps to explain how they are true). Mark portrays Jesus dying alone with none of his friends near him. At the moment Jesus dies 'for the many', he is alone, abandoned – so it seems – by all. Mark intends his readers to see in Jesus's last words intense suffering and anguish, as well as the fulfilment of the psalm, which he intends his readers to call to mind by citing the opening

[9] Lk 24, 21. [10] Mk 15, 34.

verse. (Reciting the first verse of a psalm was almost an invitation for the people to repeat the verse, as is done antiphonally in the liturgy. This was a familiar form in the liturgy of the Temple as well as in the passover rites with the singing of the *hallel*.[11] Psalm 22 had been cited earlier in the scene at Golgotha.[12]) Mark is telling us that God delivered up his own Son for us all, that this is the 'just One' dying alone for the 'unjust ones'.[13] Here Mark expresses the suffering of the Just One[14] as he experiences in all its reality what it is to be delivered up or abandoned by God. By his use of the twenty-second psalm, Mark also tells us that the suffering of the just man of the psalm becomes also the triumph of Jesus, the great eschatological triumph of God in Jesus.

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[11] Cf Mk 14, 26. [12] Cf Mk 15, 31 [13] 1 Pet 3, 18.
[14] That is, the Suffering One of pss 22 and 69.