

# DESERT OR MOUNTAIN- TOP OR CITY

By EILEEN MARY

A FEW MONTHS ago an unusual paragraph appeared in the Church of England newspaper, the *Church Times*.<sup>1</sup> It was headed 'In the world—but not of it' and was written by a layman, Peter Edwards, who felt drawn to live a solitary contemplative life in the world. After pointing out that the revival of the religious life in the Anglican Communion had produced its own solitaires, he stated:

But to some people to whom the call to the religious life has not come, there has come a need for a degree of solitude according to circumstances for the purpose of disciplined prayer. I have for a long time felt such a drawing, and widowerhood, retirement and the taking away (for perfectly good reasons) of all other means of serving God's Church appeared to be an indication that the time had come to explore further.

Nor was this all. Through an earlier letter to the *Church Times* Peter Edwards had made contact with two dozen people attracted to a similar vocation. Replies came from men and women of varying backgrounds: an Old Catholic priest; an Anglican priest's wife; someone doing an ordinary job but living alone with elderly parents nearby; a retired social worker, living alone but free to give a helping hand when needed; other retired people and one who was severely handicapped. The writer continued, 'From the replies it is clear that people are trying to live the solitary life in the world but that for each it is a personal way, no two of them travelling the same road'. Nevertheless the writer wanted his vocation to be accepted and incorporated into the Church as a whole but did not know where to turn for help and support since few parish priests understood the vocation and, 'Religious, because of their state and their training in that state are distanced from the problems or some of them encountered by the solitary in the world'.

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This article draws attention to a phenomenon, by now too widespread to be ignored, of solitary vocations arising within the Church but without formal training in the contemplative life and probably with no contact with traditional contemplative communities; though with a consciousness of belonging within the wider community of the Church. What links these people together is a common spirit no matter how much expressions of it may vary. They share a common call to serve the world by serving God rather than the other way round; a common understanding of work as acted prayer and therefore simple and humble and not too engrossing in itself; a common sense of the sacramentality of the contemplative life in its concern for the totality of creation rather than specific areas of concern; a need for hiddenness and anonymity. These genuine marks of a contemplative vocation do not need a cloister for their practice.

It is a mistake to put people too firmly into compartments, for human beings change and at middle life, or after, some of the most active begin to discover their hidden contemplative selves. A potential for contemplation buried perhaps for half a lifetime stirs and begins to grow, so that prayer and service are seen in different and more simple terms. I believe that this capacity has been given to us all, not because we are holy or have special mystical gifts but because we are human. It was not to professional contemplatives that Our Lord in answer to the question 'Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' replied, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind: and your neighbour as yourself'. If my life's fulfillment as a human being is to be found in such wholehearted love, then that is the priority for my neighbour too. Love in an earthly marriage involves more than mutual active service although it can represent one manifestation of it, and the same is true of humanity's marriage to God. Since all cannot or would not live the contemplative life in its traditional setting, we must conclude that the world itself is a not unsuitable setting for the contemplative and can provide the necessary environment for the complete gift of the self to God. We can look to the traditional community and its well-tried disciplines of common and personal prayer, asceticism, study, solitude and enclosure, communal family life and hospitality, manual and intellectual work and recreation. But environments other than that of the cloister can produce at least some of these conditions and reveal others, if the would-be

contemplative can learn how to understand, harness and use them. This is pointed out in a letter which appeared in a recent number of the *Review for Contemplatives of all Traditions*.<sup>2</sup> The writer is a married laywoman. She writes,

. . . As you already know I think that the contemplative life is of great importance to the Church and I would love to see an increase of vocations. But I see this life as a means and an opportunity for those so called to nurture the greatest gift of all: contemplative prayer. It is this gift which helps creation beyond our understanding. But I believe it to be also the call of all Christians and the natural development in a mature life of prayer. This last point seems to have been forgotten by many. It is in the maturing of the whole person that the spiritual life can also mature leading with the gift of grace to a matureness in prayer. This cannot be confined to the enclosure, nor simply produced by enclosure. Growth to maturity can be a very painful process, and it has more to do with developing the right attitudes in the heart, than merely a formal observance of directives, no matter from whom those directives may have first come.

It is unfortunate that to all intents and purposes the words 'contemplative' and 'enclosed' have become interchangeable in the Western Church and given a weight of implied holiness which they do not in themselves possess. The Eastern Church which takes a more realistic view, does not include either word in its vocabulary of the religious life. (There is a story of a bishop who felt that he should fall down in humility before a nun who was introduced as a contemplative, but discovered in time that this did not indicate particular holiness, only that she did not go out!)

Today we have to disentangle the real purpose of religious enclosure from a mystique built up over the centuries in conditions very different from our own. A life of prayer needs solitude and silence; the life of a family needs a front door which it can close in order to allow its particular life to grow. Also like any other householder today we need secure bolts and bars to keep out undesirables, but let us not spiritualize them into sacred symbols of protection for the enclosed garden in which holiness can be cultivated by the few. According to the Rule of my community, enclosure is a discipline, not an absolute. 'The purpose of the enclosed life is the preserving and deepening of prayer' (Rule of the Sisters of the Love of God). Prayer is of eternity and is an

absolute, whereas enclosure as a discipline can be more flexible, if thereby it achieves its purpose more effectively in the here and now.

It has been suggested that the too ready identification of 'contemplative' with 'monastic' and 'enclosed' could be inhibiting genuine contemplative life. This is possible both within the cloister itself and in those outside who have been accustomed to regarding it in an unrealistic and idealistic way. It is some years ago now that the late Dom Barnabas Sandeman O.S.B. was instrumental in setting up in England an Economic Commission to help enclosed communities to live their life more fully. He saw that this was being inhibited through economic necessity and shortage of young members. The burden of the heavy work, nursing care and altar bread making fell upon the few young nuns who could not be given the resources, energy or time to live their contemplative life fully. This situation was exacerbated by the rules of strict enclosure. Some communities were unaware of the help that was available and due to them from the State, and none of them was in a position to go out to investigate the possibility of less physically demanding kinds of work which could be done within the enclosure. Since then the Economic Commission has worked in a wide variety of ways to enable the nuns to live their proper lives of prayer more effectively. It has given grants and loans for pilot schemes, shown what was available in England in terms of National Insurance and allowances, offered help and advice in the care of the sick and elderly, promoted courses in theology by correspondence and much else besides. This is not to mitigate the demands of the enclosed life but to make it more effective.

To those outside of the cloister the image of the contemplative life seems daunting because it is identified with what they feel to be a secret esoteric form of life, wonderful to some, useless to others, but in any case separate from the mainstream of the Church's life. It is a serious matter if the contemplative element is regarded as being so completely removed from the daily lives of most Christians that they do not believe that it could be meant for them. There is a gap between active and contemplative which I do not believe existed in the patristic tradition but was one unfortunate result of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation which reacted against it.

My evidence for this lies in the experience of Eastern Orthodox monasticism which I encountered in the seventies through an

exchange programme between Anglican and Romanian nuns. In this Church the monasteries and villages are as closely bonded together as they must have been in the West during the Middle Ages. All religious life is what the West would call contemplative and lived on the whole within the monastery. However nuns go out for a number of reasons: for shopping, to live for a while in other monasteries if their special skills are needed, to visit their families for up to three days at a time, even to attend international conferences. In the village monasteries of Romania the nuns' houses, each containing two, three or four sisters, are centred around the church, and outside of these is a circle of villagers' houses, identical in size and design. The enclosure is within each nun's house into which one does not go unless invited. In the summer, however, rooms are sometimes available in these houses for those wanting a Christian holiday. They can join in easily with the monastic Offices which only vary in quantity, not in kind from what they know in their village churches. It may be argued that this would not be possible in the de-tribalized West, yet I recall a visit paid one Sunday to the Orthodox Monastery of St John the Baptist at Tolleshunt Knights in Essex. On that day the monastery is open to the Greeks and Cypriots from the East End of London who come for the liturgy and fellowship. I remember in particular a young girl who settled down in a corner of the refectory, completely at home, quietly doing her homework.

It is not necessary to be rigid. My own community has a property in Kent, Bede House, which to the passer-by would be indistinguishable from others in that part of the country, consisting as it does of an old farmhouse and oast house together with a number of wooden chalets scattered around the grounds. This is a branch house of the Sisters of the Love of God. The oast house is a chapel and library and the farm house is a home for four nuns which also contains a sitting room for guests or small groups. Sisters of the community live as solitaries in two of the chalets with the rest being available for guests from different denominations some of whom are themselves making a preliminary test of their vocation to the solitary life. The gate is open and some would come in who would be afraid to visit a traditional convent. A number of vocations meet together in this place. They all have something to give, some expression of the life of the Spirit which is particularly their own. Although there are boundaries and enclosures these are understood rather than underlined, and in the

worship in chapel all come together to form one congregation. Bede House represents one mode in which the contemplative and other vocations can come together and provide a new source of life for the Church as it moves forward into the next century.

However the post-Vatican Council Church is discovering other ways in which this can be done as communities and individuals move into the desert and into the city, two sides of the one coin. The life of the Little Brothers and Sisters of Charles de Foucauld provides the original vision for this form of contemplative life. Their home is in the desert to which they return from time to time, but their home is also the city where they live side by side with the poor, not as benefactors but as brothers and sisters. A more recently formed group, the Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem, situated in Paris, has been formed with similar ideals which are expressed in its Rule.

By choosing to pray in the heart of the city, you mean to show that your life is centred on God. Urban monasticism is not there for solidarity, apostolate or even witness. Your priority is to contemplate God freely and incessantly in the most beautiful of all his images . . . you gaze on him in the city of man, being faces of the face of God and mirrors of the ikon of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

This is a beautiful ideal but without a complementary desert experience it could become sentimental and shallow. The desert is a place of purification and humility where God is found in his otherness, greatness and demanding love, and it is also the place where the wounds and flaws of self are accepted and forgiven. Without this inner cleansing which needs to continue throughout life it would be difficult for a community in the heart of a city to maintain the reality and effectiveness of its contemplative life.

The Jerusalem Fraternities spend one day each week in a 'desert'. They worship together in the morning, evening and at mid-day, the time of the two former periods being arranged to meet the needs of the city workers as well as those of the Fraternity members. These have paid employment for five mornings in the week both in order to earn their own living and also to be in solidarity with other workers in the city. Work is carefully chosen in accordance with the spirit of the Fraternities. Manual work is preferred, the members being wage-earners and not engaged in private enterprise. They are tenant-occupiers of their dwellings

and so can be poor, mobile and adaptable. They are to be careful not to get too involved in their work or to become workoholics.

By choosing to work as hard as possible but not more than you ought, not primarily in view of a perishable end but one that lasts for ever, you are to stand free and challenging in a world where work has been overrated into a religion and often into a sacred cow, a world of confrontation and competition, of alienation and the rat-race for material power.<sup>4</sup>

The Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem were begun for men in 1975 and for women in 1976. They try to bring together, in various forms of membership, people coming out of a variety of ways of life. 'There are brothers in community, sisters in community, solitaires, family group members and lay Fraternities. Many and varied as they are they bear the same name and live in a common Spirit of the Rule of Life'.<sup>5</sup>

However the large section of the Rule devoted to the ordering of that life reveals that it is set quite formally within the framework of traditional Religious Life and Roman Catholic Canon law, something which though good in itself, would not do for all.

This was the complaint, it will be remembered, of Peter Edwards in the article in the *Church Times* which was quoted at the beginning of this paper. There appeared to be no help available for would-be contemplatives in the world whose lives were outside the monastic setting and who did not find their needs supplied in association with an existing traditional Order.

That this need is felt by more than a few is proved by the continual popularity of Catherine de Hueck Doherty's book, *Poustinia* and the movement which has developed as a result of it. Catherine de Hueck was an exile from the Russian revolution and although a Catholic was steeped in the traditions of Russian Orthodoxy. In her childhood she had met *poustinikki*, ordinary layfolk who had left all they possessed, found a hut or a cottage and there lived a life of prayer and fasting. They differed from Western hermits in being readily available to those who visited them and were willing to come out to help the village in time of need. In Canada where she finally settled, Catherine founded an apostolate—Madonna House—which worked for social justice among the poor and deprived. Out of this emerged the idea of the *poustinia*, a room or cottage or simple dwelling where her workers

could go for shorter or longer periods for 'prayer, penance, mortification, solitude, silence, offered in the spirit of love, atonement and reparation to God'.<sup>6</sup> The *poustinia* was to be almost stark in its simplicity with the furnishings providing only the barest necessities. Fasting was not only from food but from devouring too many books, so that the only one available was the bible. This idea spread in a way that Catherine had never envisaged even to becoming a life vocation for the few. These spent three days in the *poustinia* each week and four days outside serving the community.

All this began in Canada and the United States but rapidly spread to other parts of the Western Church so that by now it is by no means uncommon to find *poustinias* at the bottom of suburban gardens, a place of solitude and prayer for those who would otherwise be living completely in the milieu of the secular world.

My own experience of hermits in Eastern Europe was somewhat different from this Western development. It was true that when found they were welcoming and hospitable, but a visit to one of them was no light undertaking, involving as it did, a journey up mountains or through dense forests so that only the most determined or the most needy pilgrim would persevere.

A number of Anglican Communities have their own solitaries nowadays who can likewise be found either in the wilder parts of the British Isles or (in one case) on the top of a tower block in the city. He or she is representative of humanity before God, for this vocation is a kind of priesthood which offers up not only the whole of human kind in its past, present and future, but the created universe as well. Because the gathering up of the past with its memories is part of reconciliation, hermitages can appropriately be situated in holy places with good memories where saints have prayed in the past or alternatively in places where evil has come close to the surface of life such as the site of a former concentration camp or a troubled area in Northern Ireland. The setting of the hermitage is important for the hermit for it is the point through which his vocation is incarnated, binding him on that particular spot to the rest of the incarnate world.

In all the forms of contemplative life which have been mentioned here there is a note of witness to the fact that God is raising up those who will affirm values and priorities which are in danger of being lost to the Church and the world. Thomas Merton, some years ago, wrote of a Carmelite apostolate to other potential



contemplatives. 'It is an apostolate of interior prayer . . . . It teaches indeed but what it teaches above all is the way of the hidden life. And here above all . . . . no one can give something which he does not himself have.'<sup>7</sup> Merton was speaking of an apostolate from within the cloister, but for some years now I have felt that there is need for some—perhaps only a few—contemplatives to leave the security of their convents for a time, to expose themselves and their vocations to the shock of modern secular life. Having experienced for themselves the difficulties of living their vocation in the noise and speed of the city, among Christians and non-Christians with little understanding of the contemplative dimension, they would then be more fitted to encourage those who like Peter Edwards feel that religious cannot help them because they are distanced from problems encountered by the solitary in the world. I believed that the contemplative life in its fullness is tough and vigorous enough to hold its own without the protective covers which traditionally have been wrapped around it.

Therefore when Father Michael Hurley S.J. was setting up the Columbanus Community of Reconciliation in Belfast it seemed appropriate that a contemplative nun might be included in a group which was hopefully to include men and women, Catholics and Protestants, priests, religious and laity, unmarried and married persons without families. I was allowed to offer as a founder-member for three years and found myself in a group which included men and women of various denominations, cultures and countries. The Columbanus Community does not claim to be an urban contemplative community, its thrust being rather towards mission, but the definite although flexible shape of its life made it possible for the contemplative dimension to find its foothold there.

On the whole this meant leading the same life as the other members but with different emphases and priorities. God had to be at the centre rather than what I was doing for God. Prayer and waiting on God took priority over trying to arrange events by action. Work consisted of simple acts of service, sacramentals of reconciliation, rather than great things done by my own intelligence or ability. The contemplative life was hidden but hopefully threaded its way into every act and encounter, unseen and unknown to others.

On the other hand it was fed and enriched by the spirituality of others, of the Jesuit, the conservative Evangelical, the charismatic,

the simple Christian at our Church Bible group. It was enriched by the Eucharists in our chapel, celebrated in turn by the priests and ministers of all the main-line Churches in Belfast, each with its own approach and charisma within the one mystery. Prayer and intercession were made more urgent through the physical sharing of life in a busy city, especially one with the underlying tensions of Belfast.

Unity in plurality could only be achieved through the willingness to accept and welcome difference, knowing that the inability to do this is the cause of most wars and breakdowns in the world. It was something that was not found without pain and a sense of aloneness, not very different, one would imagine, from that of a hermit in the desert. Yet this was the source of a new life which could only spring up as and when risks were taken.

I have said little here about the setting for traditional enclosed communities, but they are prototypes from which modern communities have sprung. As we return repeatedly to Christ who is the living Lord of the twentieth century as well as any other we may have to review our ancient disciplines to see if they bring us nearer to him or whether they have become idols, however beautiful, which hide us from what he is asking now. Had Western and Eastern monasticism not been separated from each other, and had there been no Counter-Reformation reacting to the Reformation, these disciplines might have developed differently. As it is, new forms of contemplative living and the thirst for them in the modern world are part of our responsibility. We do not need to defend or justify our deserts in the market places, for in contemplative life, whether communal or solitary, the Holy Spirit can still bring out of his treasury things new and old.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Church Times* (December 5th 1986).

<sup>2</sup> *Review for Contemplatives of all Traditions*, 21, p 12.

<sup>3</sup> Delfieux, Pierre-Marie: *A city not forsaken: Jerusalem Rule of Life* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Introduction.

<sup>6</sup> Hueck Doherty, Catherine de: *Poustinia* (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana), p 30.

<sup>7</sup> Merton, Thomas: *Disputed questions* (Farrer, Straus and Giroux).