

A SOLITARY, CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE TODAY

By JANE MARIE RICHARDSON

MANY PEOPLE today live a solitary life, whether by choice or necessity. Of these, a very small minority feel called by God to live voluntarily alone in order to facilitate in their own lives the coming of God's reign on earth. These persons have structured their lives or are structuring them in such a way as to promote the growth of love for God and neighbour in their own hearts, with the hope that their love will somehow be extended beyond themselves.

Before considering solitude as a way of life, a few remarks on solitude in general suggest themselves. As a unique expression of divine fecundity, we are each inhabited by a solitude unmatched by any other. Paradoxically, the more we honour and respect our own solitude, the more we become capable of honouring and respecting the solitude of others. For solitude acts like a magnet drawing us toward one another while remaining distinct in our own persons. In the seed of solitude lie the possibility and fruit of human community. Solitude exposes our destiny to be one with the neighbour, to befriend the stranger, to see the enemy as our own distortion which needs correction.

Being unique and being solitary coincide in us with the exigency of being communal and being social, the need to be 'one with' and 'unique among'. So it is that to be solitary without being in community with others indicates a lapse into solipsism. Similarly, to unite with others at the expense of personal integrity falsifies friendship and subverts that fellowship of love in God for which we have been created.

* * *

Christians who embrace solitude as a way of life do so because they believe it is the most congenial, honest and loving response

read more at www.theway.org.uk

they can make to the Spirit of God speaking in their hearts. These persons believe, in effect, that it is God who invites them to live apart from the usual social context of contemporary society in order to be freer for a life of prayer and intercession and praise in union with Christ for the good of all.

What is required for one to live fruitfully and gratefully more or less apart from others? To begin with, one needs some support from other members of the larger faith community. Occasionally, this community support may be more formal or public, taking the form of an endorsement by a religious leader or of a special recognition by some significant group. These kinds of affirmation can be helpful but they are not essential for every solitary.

However, some form of bonding with the community of believers as a whole anchors and affords staying power to this form of dedication. A solitary life which becomes isolated and cut off from 'the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted' (*The Church in the modern world*, §1) betrays its source and robs the vocation of its meaning. Solitude is for communion. Aware of the conditions of suffering so prevalent in all parts of the world, the solitary asks: 'What contribution can I make to the coming of the Just One, to the creation of a climate in which justice may flourish and fulness of peace emerge?' The answer is long in coming, as we shall see.

A person choosing the solitary life needs a certain resourcefulness as well as emotional stability. Intelligence, too, helps one to be alert to life in all its forms and to cultivate a perceptiveness that allows the presence of the divine to break through in unexpected times and places within a restricted environment. For such an environment not to become 'stuffy' or 'boring', the mind and heart must be very awake and susceptible to hints and guesses of reality that show themselves in small and unpretentious ways.

A life which seeks to remain simple, to be content with less rather than more, to 'make do' with what is at hand taxes one's ingenuity and patience, but it can also stimulate creativity: solitaries learn skills they never thought of before. Minimizing needs brings a sense of relief and unburdening but the letting go is felt. Emotionally, the solitary knows the craving of human appetites and must struggle, as others do, to use common sense in dealing with them. Good judgment helps to avoid unnecessary stress and strain, detrimental to consecrated solitude. Even the

peace which comes from a sense of living in God's will does not protect the solitary from the distress caused by residues of sin, by the experience of weakness, by flashes of evil, all of which try to gain a foothold in the imagination. A light touch can help.

In living alone the solitary has opted to deal with these ambiguities, on a day to day basis, with very little human companionship. It is not easy to live this way and it can be dangerous but grace knows how to work everywhere. Solitude does not spare our feelings and succeeds quite well in unmasking our pretensions and illusions. As for the comfort of daily companions, friendship with God quietly begins to change loneliness into communion, aloneness into oneness. Loving prayer brings family and friends, the whole world, into one's interior space and that is what keeps solitude true and luminous, liberating and purposeful.

To maintain these perspectives a solitary will generally relate with some consistency to a spiritual counsellor who may assist in an ongoing way with these efforts to interpret reality as it is and not as one would like. An objective listener, who has no vested interest in decisions to be made or choices to be preferred, offers the solitary invaluable help in avoiding spiritual, mental, physical and psychological errors.

Besides a spiritually trained and adept listener with whom to check out things periodically, a solitary will find conversations with certain others a sound source of encouragement and an impetus to fidelity. Faithful friends who share the gospel as daily norm and the Spirit within as daily guide embody the truth of Sirach: 'A faithful friend is beyond price . . . a life-saving remedy . . . a sturdy shelter' (Sir 6,14-15). God does not leave the solitary friendless. Conversations with these friends, from time to time, rekindle the desire to belong wholly to God and to God's people; they tend to lift flagging spirits and to urge on the searching heart. Words spoken in friendship often carry power to sharpen the focus of prayer and to muster pluck for the long haul. A treasure indeed!

One needs much inner freedom to live alone with God for others. One of the effects of an expanding consciousness and growth in compassion is the desire to be more and to do more. This desire tugs at the commitment to be faithful to prayer and silence, even as it underscores their meaning. The Spirit must show the way. Solitaries understand and appreciate the counsel of Zen: 'Don't just do something; stand there!' and so they continue

to keep God mindful, perhaps others, too. No strangers to reasonable renunciation, solitaries need firm conviction about their vocation to live in contemplation, a conviction which can only be born of love and nourished by faith while lived in trust.

Over and over, the solitary faces the testing of trust. She or he discovers that Dostoevski was right: love can be 'a harsh and dreadful thing' as it moves unrelentingly into the usually closed-off corners of the heart. Life with a minimum of external distractions and diversions easily falls prey to a host of unwanted interior intrusions. If dealt with honestly and calmly, these invasions of spirit relate the solitary to others who have become conscious of the evil present in their own depths. Little escape is possible, there is nowhere to go, no one on whom to shift the burden or the blame. Indeed, the awareness of personal sin and the enormity of accumulated human culpability can bring on a kind of sadness and depression which, if not lightened by recourse to prayer or constructive work, can be damaging to one's health and well-being.

What does one do about the evil within? Appeals to mercy, accepts the pain, begins again the slow work of conversion, remembers Jesus on the cross. Liturgical prayer can be bracing: 'This is the cup of my blood which will be shed for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven'. Facing the enemy within requires befriending oneself in forgiveness over and over again. We learn how to forgive from God who forgives us without castigation. Grappling with our shadowed reality consumes time and energy but it serves to open us up to the reality of salvation and to compassion for others. We become a little humble.

The fact that we may have been conscious for years of God's abiding presence and goodness does not exempt us from the fear brought on by manifestations of evil. Whatever it may look like to the passing observer, the solitary life is no privileged path to peace. It is often a darkness in which only obedient faith in God restores equilibrium and brings healing. One takes courage from the memory of all those who have stood firm in the teeth of trial. Renewed energy comes from knowing oneself called to join a 'cloud of witnesses' (Heb 12,17) who celebrate the amazing grace of God, and to participate in life that never dies. Confidence in God and God's word sustains the one who has chosen solitude or who has been chosen for it.

It is important to note that resistance to evil can draw one very near to all those who sit at Greenham Common or march on a picket line or climb over chain-link fences at military industrial complexes. Knowing that evil 'out there' has a foothold 'in here' sobers both the one who waits and the one who moves. Because both have discovered something of their own complicity with social sin, both aspire to a non-violence that is respectful even in its resistance. Persons in justice and peace ministry and persons in contemplative ministry experience a mutual affinity for each other, to the benefit of all. The same Spirit leads one party to drive an undocumented worker to safety as leads the other to fast and pray. It is the same knowledge which motivates both ways of giving; it is the same love at work within them that impels both to assist the neighbour as their gifts permit. Social compassion is not the responsibility of one group of Christians rather than another; it is ingredient to being Christian at all. Christ is not divided.

Since there are innumerable ways of being compassionate, it is, therefore, of no special consequence—though hopefully of some good—that occasionally a member of the Christian community, like this one, will be asked to step aside and reflect, to pray and write, to sing and chop wood, to accompany a few others on their spiritual journey, to dwell in silent praise. Solitary life is a very ordinary life, a simple way of participating in the universal Christian joy and struggle brought on by the radically liberating and creative power of the gospel.

Diverse vocations and multiple modes of living them out point to a Creator of inexhaustible surprise. In one way or another, each of us comes to image that Word spoken in the humanity of Jesus, the Suffering Servant, the Risen Christ, the Compassionate One. Every form of loving commitment derives its validity and beauty from its likeness to his life, or rather, from his life taking shape in and flowing through that commitment. God seems to find delight in original people who relate to each other with appreciation, and in things which harmonize. Creation and re-creation inspire a complementarity to be esteemed, not a competition to rouse threat. The sweeping freedom of Jesus's truth gathers us all in one embrace.

* * *

As I turn over on my right side, my eye is caught, held. In the narrow opening between the curtain and the window frame hangs big, brilliant, beautiful Sirius, rejoicing that the hunt is over. Midnight loveliness . . . called by name . . .

Augustine, if the one who sings prays twice, what about the one who also composes the songs and then sings them?

How quiet the place feels today. As I walked down the road, the white pines with their pungent scent seemed to breathe me rather than I them.

Warm hospitality for my missionary friend from Liberia who could not stay long. She tells marvellous stories about the jungle. Why did I talk so much?

Mother's death—the ache of it. Where are you, darling Elsie? Presence and absence, mixed up. Distance all wiped out, nearness too. My grief unobserved.

What do you mean when you say: 'On that day you will have no more questions to ask me?' My curiosity will end? Hardly. On that day will you ask *me* questions?

The robins took over the yard, frisking up the leaves to find a little breakfast. Their fresh, burnt-orange breasts bulged with new life. Where have you been these past months? No matter. They are here this morning and their gala search has made my day.

The hunter came close to the cabin last night. What would I have done had he come up on the porch? Invited him in? Called a neighbour? Pretended not to be home? Gandhi, you never lived alone in these woods.

Like Nietzsche, I can only believe in a dancing god. Move, little dancer, move! and maybe the squirrels will join you.

* * *

May not the swift and silent wings of love's Spirit be hovering over our planet more closely than the death-dealing shadows of nuclear weaponry? As we approach the closing decade of this century, we note people from many different backgrounds and persuasions engaged in renewal of spirit, taking advantage of retreat houses and prayer institutes, scriptural and theological studies, sabbatical periods for prayer and reflection and other similar offerings now available. We see, too, an almost endless procession of books and magazines devoted to fostering the contemplative dimension of life as the way to reorder priorities in our lives and in our world. While it is obvious that these materials and activities do not make contemplatives, they do suggest that many persons in today's restless society are searching intently for a deeper union with God and a better way to relate to their neighbours near and far. As this desire is kindled by patient prayer and enlightened by attention to God's pervasive presence, it will penetrate the core of our existence both as individuals and as

community, hastening the possibility of a new pentecost in which good persons become women and men of God.

Our conversion and transformation as human beings into sisters and brothers of one another depends on our openness to grace and our willingness to follow its requiring lead. Sometimes we are surprised at how we have changed, or have been changed. And it causes us to ponder and to praise. At other times we resist the light shining before our mind's eye: change is costly. As we listen carefully to the voice of truth within us, we are shown what we need to see and taught what we need to learn. Under the hidden and loving gaze of God, we look long into our hearts and lives and recognize there what the Spirit has been trying to show us all along. Contemplative consciousness discovers what is to be done and undergone, accepted and resisted, if divine love is to have its way in our world, beginning with ourselves.

Gradually, we come to understand that loving God means taking trouble for others and self, that loving self is a way of honouring God and understanding others, and that loving others is a way of strengthening self and of glorifying God the Creator. We intuit the oneness of love. The meaning and direction of our lives are shot through with that insight. Change occurs quietly but affects us radically. We grow steadily, if not easily, in our appreciation of what matters most; we discern more clearly what is important and significant, what is worthwhile if we are to live more fully in God and in harmony with our neighbour in God.

An inner necessity, at once free and freeing, moves us to submit our whole being to the trusted and ultimate Mystery of Life itself. Everything and everyone becomes a revelation of that Mystery, as well as a further provocation to explore. Traces of trinitarian presence surround us and invite our attention as we learn to see with the light given us within. There are no more 'distractions', no need to 'block out' anything. In people, places and things, in ideas, events and inspirations, in memories, fears and dreams, we recognize an avenue to God. Everything occasions prayer.

Contemplation reveals how much God loves us and nothing else can energize us so powerfully. To contemplate is to see something of God's truth and to live out of it, to see something of endless beauty and to give it our own expression, to see something of eternal goodness and to communicate it concretely here and now. By contrast, evil is also exposed for the deformation of truth and love that it really is. Seeing authors our being, for what we see,

what we choose to look at, determines what and who we shall become and, together, what we shall make of our world. To contemplate, to 'see into the holy', helps us form a vision of reality which contains in itself the potential for reaching out to others as God reaches out to us.

From this point of view, contemplative life energizes us for understanding what is to be done and even constitutes the manner in which it is to be done. How we act may be more effective than what we do, although many of us have probably been glad for Chesterton's quip: 'A thing worth doing is worth doing badly'. Cultivating a contemplative approach to action can clothe that action with a calm and a trust that Isaiah assures us offers strength and salvation (Isai 30,15). In short, this steady gazing into the darkness of Holy Mystery, where we hope to catch a glimmer of light, ends by sparking our love for the neighbour.

This reciprocal dynamism of active contemplation and contemplative action forms the nucleus of Christian life, life in Christ, life in God. Jesus, knowing himself loved by Abba and led by the Spirit, poured out his life for others, forgiving them everything. Our own lives follow this pattern, laid out for use in the gospel. Knowing ourselves loved by God and indwelt by the Spirit, we too become capable, little by little, of total self-donation. Love will work its way in us, unfailingly.

These two facets of loving commitment, the looking inward and the reaching outward, belong always together. In fidelity to our vocational gifts and responsibilities we achieve a proper balance. Since each of us is uniquely oriented and endowed, the work of integrating the contemplative and active dimensions of our common humanity takes on a variety of expressions. A simple example: some of us, as introverts, process our thoughts and decisions and experiences more quietly within, and so tend to proceed slowly and tentatively in the external world. Others of us, more extroverted, move rather quickly and spontaneously into outward dialogue and deed. The God who 'knit me with love in mother's womb' (Ps 139,13) and the Spirit who 'governs all things well' (Wis 8,1) has boundless ingenuity and great courtesy, regarding kindly the basic givens of our individual humanity.

The interplay of graced vision and loving act illumines and animates our lives. Seeing and sharing are like magnetic poles of love which call out to each other; one grows as the other does. Each pole nudges us for adequate attention and expression and

saves us from harmful extremes. This means, among other things, that our spontaneity will need to be educated; our reflection to be activated; our swiftness to be monitored and our carefulness to be gently prodded. As students of life, we inch faithfully forward toward that fulness of life to which God calls us. Of course, this is an ideal, the ideal of the good news wholly incarnated. Only one has ever managed to do this perfectly and no other ever shall, but we walk in his footsteps, no longer servants but friends. It is he, Christ Jesus, who shows us that contemplation and action are two modalities of one Love. This same Love unites Jesus and Abba, Jesus and us, us with each other, our work with our prayer.

* * *

In moving toward a conclusion, we must pick up, briefly, the question posed earlier in these pages: what, if anything, can the solitary do to speak in a fruitful way to the social issues of our day? One is tempted to say: next to nothing. If a solitary fasts, that does not provide food for the hungry. If she or he intercedes, that does not really remove the boot of an oppressor. If the solitary works hard at manual labour, that does not really free up a job for an unemployed worker. If the solitary offers hospitality to one passing through, that does not procure any housing for the homeless. What, then, is the good of being solitary? Is such a life strictly for the benefit of the one leading it? Has contemplative life, whatever its form, nothing to offer a suffering world?

It must be admitted that a solitary life, in and of itself, offers little hope of alleviating anything, much less the grievous ills that afflict people all over the earth. In some sense, the solitary can only be with these suffering sisters and brothers as 'a guilty bystander', in the words of Thomas Merton.

As a lifestyle, solitude would seem to offer least to our society. While it aims at radical and universal love in Christ, it remains essentially hidden and quite lacking in tangible results. Any lifestyle, of course, is simply a kind of framework or scaffolding arrangement within which one lives one's life as best one can, trying to be true to its possibilities and demands. No lifestyle, however, guarantees love, and only love saves. So the value of life cannot be determined by the life-style, whether voluntary or not. Every person is certainly shaped profoundly by the circumstances

and setting of his or her life, but God loves persons, not lifestyles, and confers grace on the former, not on the latter. One must hope that there are opportunities for human development in every life-situation. In any case there is only relative freedom to choose one's situation and that choice belongs to few.

Life itself cannot be contained in any lifestyle, it will always erupt into 'the more'. Those free to choose one form of life rather than another must do so, then, because of the promise of abundant life which it holds. We agree with St Irenaeus that 'the glory of God is the human being fully alive'. The solitary chooses life centred on the contemplation of God because he or she sees in it the greatest potential for life-giving, life-receiving and life-sharing possibilities. What in this lifestyle actually bears the promise? And in what does this promise consist?

In every lifestyle, in every life, it is God who carries the promise and God who is promised. God breaks open that promise uttered in the heart and discloses its wonder to the pilgrim seeker. Julian of Norwich points out: 'There is nothing very special about seeking. It is a thing that every soul can do with God's grace'. Encouraged by this assurance, the solitary explicitly seeks the face of God. But God is always there first, waiting. To contemplate God in nature and in the word and in the soul, to love and explore the Mystery, to share a few fruits: this is the deepest desire, the primary demand and the daily occupation of one called to solitude as a way of life.

Each one answering that call will do so differently and distinctly but all will be asked to surrender freely to God, whose Spirit pervades the silence and blesses the ordinary. In dialogue with this Spirit the solitary learns detachment and yields to reality. What is needed will be given at just the right time. It is the task of the solitary to wait for this time of God, to trust it, to live each moment on the alert for its appearing.

Perhaps the solitary, living quietly in the silence of God, may suggest the depths of mysterious and abundant life present as a seed in every human heart. Solitaries long for that seed to grow to its fullest potential, wishing this for others as for themselves, holding everyone in the same prayer. Having been discovered by Love and freed to respond, they glimpse the end in which is our beginning: each one and everyone transformed into that Love.

This discovery and transformation is the intent of every solitary life undertaken as a vocation to love. May not such a life at least serve as a pointer, a hope, a reminder?