SELF, SEXUALITY AND SOLITUDE IN JOHN CASSIAN AND THOMAS MERTON:

Notes from a Retreat

by **Frank A. Peake**

Thomas Merton was destined to be different, partly because of the circumstances of his childhood and early life, partly, as he firmly believed, because the hand of God was upon him. His early years gave little indication of what lay ahead. His year at Cambridge was disastrous. His time at Columbia showed little sign of spiritual greatness until the end. From the time of his second baptism (he had been baptized in the Church of England in infancy) the sense of vocation grew quickly and intensely and led him into the religious life. As a monk he was well read in monastic spirituality and one of his heroes was John Cassian. In many of his talks to novices he drew on the experience of Cassian but with a practical discernment between the ideal and the actual. Merton knew that, in the trite phrase, God loves and accepts the sinner while hating the sin. Merton understood perhaps better than Cassian the truth of the dominical saying, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much" (Luke 7.47). By the time of his death in

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1968, he was recognized as one of the foremost spiritual leaders of the West. One of his great achievements was to maintain a living relationship with his God and at the same time a close and sympathetic contact with the world at large. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the striking parallels between Cassian and Merton. Clearly Merton would have been aware of these patterns.

John Cassian was probably born in Dobrudje, Scythia Minor. His language was more probably Latin than Greek, but as an adult he was almost certainly bilingual.[1] He could evidently converse with Greek monks in their own language, and his writing has the mind set of the Greeks. In 392, or probably some years earlier, accompanied by an older friend named Germanus, he entered a monastery near the cave of the Nativity of Bethlehem. While they were there an old man came to the house and asked to be received as a novice. The superior put the visitor into the cell of Germanus and Cassian and for three years he worked happily as an assistant gardener. Then came some visiting pilgrims who recognized him. He was no novice but the superior of a large community near Panephysis in Lower Egypt who had run away to avoid the strain and responsibility of his office. The visitors took him home again with "reverent and careful precautions" to prevent his escape on the way. But, once home again, he escaped again to the cell of Cassian only to be discovered a second time and taken back.

This strange novice made a deep impression on Cassian and may be one of the factors which prompted his wish to visit Egypt. Germanus and Cassian determined to go and see for themselves. The elders of Bethlehem felt that they were too inexperienced and were reluctant to let them go. Eventually they gave in. The two were allowed to go after promising that they would return as quickly as possible. As events turned out, the few years Cassian spent in Bethlehem provided his chief experience of community life.

At this time Egypt had a high reputation for sanctity and devotion and the two visitors soon came to the conclusion that Egyptian spirituality was far superior to anything they knew and that they could not live as they ought in the Bethlehem community. They wandered from group to group or from hermit to hermit, spending their days in saying psalms and listening to hermit wisdom. From these experiences came *The Conferences*, essays based on their experiences. There is no complete edition of *The Conferen-*

1. Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 10. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Chadwick*.

ces available in English although most of them are in a translation by E. C. S. Gibson (1898). As Merton himself suggests, the translation is somewhat stilted and unimaginative. There is a more recent translation of some of the *Conferences* by Cole Luibheid.[2] Cassian stands within the Greco-Gallican tradition, in a way that Augustine did not. His thinking was Greek rather than Latin, loving rather than legalistic.

There was, however, for Germanus and Cassian, the matter of their promise and they eventually found themselves in a moral dilemma. They were finally persuaded, without too much difficulty, that their spiritual well-being overrode the obligation to return. They might have stayed indefinitely in Egypt but for some theological difficulties with Evagrius Ponticus.

Evagrius (346-399) was a native of Pontus, the son of a country bishop who became a noted spiritual writer and preacher. He was ordained deacon by Gregory Nazienzen. In 382, he went to the Nitrian desert in Libya to cultivate his soul among the monks and remained there until his death. In his fights against the demon of lust he stood naked in a well through winter nights. He never consented to a bath and his food was repellent and scanty. He died at Epiphany in 399 claiming that "for three years I have not been troubled by the desires of the flesh, after so long a life of toil and increasing prayer." He was an important figure in Christian spirituality and was the chief theologian of the Origenist theory of the monastic life. He had a profound influence on Palladius, Cassian, Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor. He transmitted many of Origen's central ideas. This aroused the ire of Theophilus, the Bishop of Alexandria, who, a few months after the death of Evagrius, used his festal letter, the letter sent out by custom every year to fix the dates of Lent and Easter, to attack the anthropomorphic simplicity of hermit prayers (Chadwick, p. 28).

Theophilus put forward the doctrine that God is not like a man and cannot be seen or touched. The letters reached the communities of the desert and raised the anger and opposition of some of the monks who felt that God had been taken from them. A number of them went to Alexandria and caused riots. Theophilus went out to meet the approaching band and, according to Cassian, reversed himself by saying: "When I see you, I see the face of God." "Then," said the monks, "if you really believe that, condemn the works of Origen." Theophilus consented to do so on the spot. Another

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2. *John Cassian: Conferences*, translation and preface by Cole Luibheid, with an introduction by Owen Chadwick (New York: Paulist Press, 1985). It contains abridged versions of Conferences 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, and 18. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Conferences*.

view suggests that "Theophilus attacked Nitria with a drunken troop of soldiers, burnt the cells of their three leaders, their copies of the Scriptures, the consecrated elements, and even a boy" (Chadwick, p. 29). Whatever the truth may be, there was rioting in Nitria and Cassian apparently made his way to Constantinople where he was ordained deacon against his will by John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople, who became his protector. Chrysostom himself evoked the ire of Theophilus and was condemned and exiled by the Synod of the Oak in 403. Cassian fled to Rome where he was ordained priest and perhaps driven out by the invasion of Alaric in 410.

Some years later he founded twin monasteries dedicated to St. Victor at Marseilles, one for men and one for women. Those were tumultuous days and the Gauls needed someone who could present to them the way of life of the Egyptian movement. They found such a man in Cassian. Numbers of requests came to him for information and advice and in response he wrote the *Institutes* which deal with the dress, life and prayers of the monks and with the eight temptations.[3] There are twelve of them and with certain exceptions they were translated into English by E. C. S. Gibson, afterward bishop of Gloucester, in 1894. There are literary difficulties in knowing which manuscripts are the originals and whether they were actually written by Cassian. The *Institutes* are as close as Cassian came to providing a rule for his monks. Merton was later to study these in detail.

At the outset, Merton seemed a singularly unlikely candidate for the monastic life. He was born in 1915 in southeastern France. His parents were struggling artists. Merton himself seemed destined to be different. At school in England he exhibited an independence and toughness of mind quite unlike others of his age. As he passed into his twenties, Merton was

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3. E. C. S. Gibson translated all except Institute VI in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Volume XI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894). The titles are as follows:

I Of the dress of the monks.
II Of the canonical system of the nocturnal prayers and psalms.
III Of the canonical system of the daily prayers and psalms.
IV Of the Institutes of the Renunciata.
V Of the spirit of gluttony.
VI Of the spirit of fornication.

This was not translated and Chadwick says of it: "The sixth book is a coherent discussion on how to conquer lust. It begins at the beginning, proceeds systematically, and stops. How to acquire chastity; how to keep chastity; what the state of chastity makes possible; the integrity of the human soul and its preservation; and a final summary. Nothing could be more definite, nothing more intelligible" (Chadwick, p. 43).

VII Of the spirit of covetousness.
VIII Of the spirit of anger.
IX Of the spirit of dejection.
X Of the spirit of accidie [boredom].
XI Of the spirit of vain-glory.
XII Of the spirit of pride.

torn between dissatisfaction with his present circumstances and the yearning for a more truly "religious" life. His first major step was a discovery, or re-discovery, of religion as he talked to faculty and students at Columbia and with others in New York. Through them and through a reading of Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, which he came upon by accident, he came to an entirely new vision and realization of God. In his own words:

> The life of the soul is not knowledge, it is love, since love is the act of the supreme faculty, the will, by which man is formally united to the final end of all his strivings — by which man becomes one with God.[4]

A little later he went to a Roman Catholic mass. He was impressed by the worshippers:

> What a revelation it was, to discover so many ordinary people in a place together, more conscious of God than of one another: not there to show off their hats or their clothes but to pray, or at least to fulfil a religious obligation, not a human one .... Jesus Christ was not simply a man, a good man, a great man, the greatest prophet, a wonderful healer, a saint: He was something that made all such trivial words pale into irrelevance. He was God .... And how did we know? Because it was revealed to us in the Scriptures and confirmed by the teaching of the Church and of the powerful unanimity of Catholic Tradition from the First Apostles ... and the early Fathers ... to our own day. (*SSM*, p. 208)

His interest continued to grow until one day, as he reported:

> All of a sudden, something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me. It was a moment that spoke like a voice. "What are you waiting for?" it said. "Why are you sitting here? Why do you still hesitate? You know what you ought to do? Why don't you do it?"
>
> I stirred in the chair. I lit a cigarette, looked out the window at the rain, tried to shut the voice up. "Don't act on impulse," I thought, "This is crazy. This is not rational. Read your book." ... "What are you waiting for?" said the voice within me again. "Why are you sitting there? It is useless to hesitate any longer. Why don't you get up and go?" ... Suddenly I could bear it no longer. I put down the book, and got into my raincoat, and started down the stairs. I went out into the street. I crossed over, and walked along by the grey wooden fence, towards Broadway, in the light rain, towards Corpus Christi Church .... (*SSM*, pp. 215-216)

There was the end and the beginning of his pilgrimage. In November 1938, he was baptized into the Church of Rome. He next felt an urge to the priesthood. He applied to the Franciscans and was provisionally accepted

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4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 191. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

by them. They refused when he felt it necessary to tell them of his earlier adventures. Devastated, he decided that if he could not be a monk he would live as one. He had always been interested in writing and, for a time, considered journalism as a profession. He took an M. A. at Columbia in English and secured a teaching appointment at St. Bonaventure University, run by the Franciscans, in upstate New York. There he lived the religious life as best he could. He bought the necessary breviaries and manuals and, without seeking any assistance, ploughed his way through them. At the same time, he began to think of himself as a budding novelist and poet. In spite of all this there remained the nagging feeling that he belonged in the religious life. In this he was encouraged by some of his friends. He spent Holy Week 1941 in retreat at the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He returned in December as a postulant.

The paradox for Thomas Merton was that he believed his vocation to lie in a life of quiet prayer and contemplation, even that of a hermit, but he was constantly drawn, partly by circumstances, partly by his own inclinations, to a life of prominence and activity. It is probably a paradox which we all share. We believe that we are called by God but we want to set the terms. We are afraid to let go. We also have an idealistic, perhaps naive, view of what is meant by the spiritual life. We assume that once we have responded to the call of God difficulties will disappear and all will be smooth sailing.

SELF

It may sound strange to speak of self in terms of relationships. Yet we all know that we do, sometimes, stand aside and view ourselves from the outside as it were. When we do that we are often much harder on ourselves than we are on other people. We look at ourselves with disgust. We assume that we are far worse than others. We say to ourselves, "If others really knew me as I know myself, they would be disgusted and would refuse to have anything to do with me." It is not altogether clear why we do this but we have been led to believe that love of self is wrong and immoral.

Most people have an idealized picture of the kind of person they would like to be and a feeling of regret sometimes amounting to revulsion that they have failed to achieve the ideal. Paul could write: "I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7.15). Significantly, there are echoes of this both in Cassian and in Merton, but Merton goes beyond Cassian.

For Cassian the end of the monastic life was perfection, the life "hid with Christ in God." "The aim of the monk," wrote Cassian, "is to crucify all his desires and. according to that salutary command of evangelical perfection, to take no thought for the morrow" (*Conference* 19, chapter 7). This is to be achieved by a life of renunciation and prayer. In his third conference Cassian speaks of the renunciation proposed by Scripture and tradition:

> The first is that by which as far as the body is concerned we make light of all the wealth and goods of this world;
>
> the second, that by which we reject the fashions and vices and former affections of soul and flesh;
>
> the third that by which we detach our soul from all present and visible things, and contemplate only things to come and set our hearts on what is invisible.

In Conference 11, Cassian discusses the reasons for these renunciations. Sometimes they are undertaken for fear of consequences, the threat of hell; sometimes for the hope of reward, the promise of heaven; or sometimes from sheer love of God. This love of God for his people is the keynote of Cassian's writing. Individually and corporately we are to be enveloped and totally motivated by the love of God. This leads Germanus to ask, and Germanus is nearly always the spokesperson: "If God begins and ends everything, what room is there for free will?" The reply of Paphnutius is that initially we have the opportunity to reject or accept God, but having turned to him our devotion and commitment must be complete. He adds:

> It is well for us to be sure that although we practice every virtue with unceasing efforts, yet with all our exertions and zeal we can never arrive at perfection, nor is mere human diligence and toil of itself sufficient to reach the splendid reward of bliss unless we have secured it by means of the cooperation of the Lord, and his directing what is right.
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> (*Conference* 3, chapter 11)

Throughout Cassian there is the feeling, probably exaggerated, that he has not nearly approached this end and that life is a constant struggle, yet he knew what it meant to be enveloped in the love of God.

Merton was also aware of such a tension and it was one to which he returned constantly. Entrance into the monastery did not solve his inner struggle. He soon discovered, as we have discovered, that it was not possible to live the whole of his life on a high, romantic plane. This came not from any disillusionment with his surroundings nor from a longing for freedom, but from the sad little discovery that, despite the outward change in his way of life, he had not changed inwardly at all.

He had, as it were, brought two selves with him into the monastery, the part of him that wanted to be a hermit and the other part which was clamoring to be a writer, and they constantly fought against each other. Merton said of his other self:

> "He generates books . . . in the silence that ought to be sweet with the infinitely productive darkness of contemplation." The willed identity, that of the recollected monk, was being usurped by another identity that arose unbidden. "One of us," he remarked ominously, "has got to die."[5]

Entrance into the monastery may not have solved his inner struggle, but, like Cassian, he entered into the spirit of love which he found in Scripture and tradition. There are times when we feel isolated from God and other people and that reconciliation is necessary, but as a rule our relationship with God should be one of happy confidence inspired by mutual love. As Cassian says:

> There is a great difference between the one who extinguishes the fires of sin out of fear of hell or hope of future reward and the one who, moved by the love of God, turns in horror from evil and uncleanness . . . . if someone has really conquered the onslaught of sin, he enjoys a secure peace and passes over to the love of virtue itself and he will have an unshaken place by that good of which he is utterly seized . . . . To him nothing is dearer, nothing more precious, than the purity which he now possesses.
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> (*Conference* 11, chapter 8)

Merton wrote in his journal:

> Love sails me around the house. I walk two steps on the ground and four in the air. It is love. It is consolation. I don't care if it is consolation. I am not attached to consolation. I love God. Love carries me all around. I don't want to do anything but love. And when the bell rings it is like pulling teeth to make myself shift because of that love, secret love, hidden love, obscure love, down inside me and outside me where I don't care to talk about it. Anyway I don't have the time or the energy to discuss such matters. I have only time for eternity, which is to say for love, love, love.[6]

Loving oneself properly, which means seeing and accepting our wholeness, will then enable us to see and accept the wholeness of others. Acceptance of self finds expression in compassion for others and this comes from a true understanding of our relationship with God. There is a delicate balance between God, self and other. Thomas Merton speaks of it in this way:

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5. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 139-140.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 120. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*.

> We become ourselves by dying to ourselves. We gain only what we give up, and if we give up everything we gain everything. We cannot find ourselves within ourselves. We must forget ourselves in order to become truly conscious of who we are. The best way to love ourselves is to love others, yet we cannot love others unless we love ourselves . . . . But if we love ourselves in the wrong way, we become incapable of loving anybody else. And indeed when we love ourselves wrongly we hate ourselves; if we hate ourselves we cannot help hating others.
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> Our destiny is in our hands since God has placed it there, and given us his grace to do the impossible. It remains for us to take up courageously and without hesitation the work he has given us, which is the task of living our own life as Christ would live it in us . . . .[7]

Any profound spiritual experience brings with it an intense sense of exhiliration followed, almost inevitably, by a reaction into dryness and aridity. This is what Merton seemed to have felt, likening it, although he does not say so, to Jonah's time in the belly of the great fish:

> Yesterday afternoon, in the cornfield, I began to feel rather savage about the whole business. I suppose this irritation was the sign that the dry period was reaching its climax and was about to go over again into the awful battle with joy. My soul was cringing and doubling up and subconsciously getting ready for the next tidal wave. At the moment all I had left in my heart was an abyss of self-hatred — waiting for the next appalling sea. (*SJ*, p. 241)

The mood passed and a few months later he wrote of going into the woods alone and climbing the hills beyond the monastery.

> When I reached the top I found there was something terrible about the landscape. But it was marvelous. The completely unfamiliar aspect of the forest beyond our rampart unnerved me. It was as though I were in another country. I saw the steep, savage hills, covered with black woods and half buried in the storm that was coming from the southwest. And ridges traveled away from this center in unexpected directions. I said, "Now you are indeed alone. Be prepared to fight the devil." But it was not the time of combat. I started down the hill again feeling that perhaps after all I had climbed it uselessly.
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> Halfway down, and in a place of comparative shelter, just before the pine trees begin, I found a bower God had prepared for me like Jonas's ivy [Jonah 4.6]. It had been especially designed for this moment. There was a tree stump in an even place. It was dry and a small cedar arched over it, like a green tent, forming an alcove. There I sat in silence and loved the wind in the forest and listened for a good while to God. (*SJ*, p. 264)

But this could not continue and the incident is a parable of Merton's life. He had come to terms with the fact that he would continue to be a

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7. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1955), p. xvif, 133. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NMI*.

writer but what else? In some respects he found that his writing increased his opportunities for contemplation but there were so many other things to do. Mundane tasks filled much of the day. He was beginning to think of living as a hermit but increased literary demands seemed to rule that out. In January 1950, he signed a long-term contract with a publishing house and commented:

> That probably means the final renouncement forever of any dream of a hermitage. God will prepare for me His own hermitage for my last days, and meanwhile my work is my hermitage because it is *writing* that helps me most of all to be a solitary and a contemplative here at Gethsemani. (*SJ*, p. 269)

SEXUALITY

Other types of inner struggle manifest themselves in Cassian and Merton. Although he was of a deeply spiritual nature and insistent on the love of God in the life of the Christian, Cassian seems to have been unduly preoccupied with sex and seems never to have come to terms with his own sexuality. Owen Chadwick has written of him:

> He was an ethical guide of rare quality, especially for that date and age and place. He can be long and repetitive. On occasion he can be boring. He spends more time than is reasonable on sexuality .... He knew a lot about the ancient world. He knew of the sexual experience of eunuchs and of boys before puberty — probably this knowledge came from pastoral care in the city of Constantinople, where for a few years he was a cleric.[8]

In one of his conferences on prayer, Cassian commented:

> While I am still in the midst of a struggle within suddenly an irritation of the flesh affects me and tries by a pleasant sensation to draw me to consent while in my sleep. In order that a raging fire from without may not burn up the fragrant blossoms of chastity, I must cry out: "O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me." (*Conference* 10, chapter 10)

And in words spoken by his friend Germanus, he was even more specific:

> Sometimes when we are fasting more strictly than usual, and are exhausted and worn out, severe bodily struggles are excited. For often on waking from sleep, when we have discovered that we have been defiled we are so dejected in heart that we do not even venture faithfully to rise even for prayer. (*Conference* 21, chapter 35)

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8. Colm Luibheid, "Introduction" in *John Cassian: Conferences* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 7. Subsequent references to the "Introduction" are cited in the text as Luibheid.

This dichotomy in Cassian would not have been lost on Thomas Merton. Here was a man, thought Merton, who had drunk deeply of the love of God but who had not learned to accept his own humanity. Because of his own past experiences Merton was apparently able to do both. He knew himself intimately and he had come to know God. He saw humanity, including his own, as something to be accepted and loved.

For Merton, the pleasant sensation which Cassian feared should not be a raging fire to evoke feelings of guilt and self-recrimination. It is an intimate expression of loving self-acceptance. In an essay on purity Merton said that the general impression is:

> To have a slight velleity for sexual pleasure is slightly unpure. To get an erection is more so. To touch sexual organs — one's own or those of others — is still more so. To have an orgasm is most so. This whole attitude of abstraction, of hatred and denigration of the body, has finally led to a pathological and totally unrealistic obsession with bodily detail.[9]

What is needed, says Merton, is a new approach to the whole concept of purity and sexuality which takes into account the physical meaning and reality of love. Here Merton seems to go beyond the traditional patterns of thought such as we find in Cassian. In reporting a conference with Abbot Theonas, Cassian tells how Theonas, after being married for five years, underwent a conversion experience and "returned home . . . to urge [his wife] that together they might serve God in sanctity and chastity." His wife was unmoved and said that "as she was in the flower of her age she could not altogether do without the solace of her husband." Whereupon Theonas "stripped himself of all his worldly goods, and fled to a monastery, where in a very short time he was so famous for his sanctity and humility that [on the death of the abbot] Theonas was unanimously elected to succeed him." Cassian is careful to add that he neither approves nor disapproves but the enthusiasm with which he tells the story makes the direction of his thinking clear (*Conference* 21, chapters 8-10). Quite different is the attitude of Merton who says that the marriage relationship should not be one

> in which two people seek to love each other in spirit and in truth *in spite of their bodies*, but on the contrary, use all the resources of body, mind, heart, imagination, emotion and will, in order to celebrate the love that has been given to them by God, and in so doing to praise him.
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> (*L & L*, p. 113)

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9. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 113. Hereafter referred to in the text as *L & L*.

The sexual relationship in marriage is the ultimate expression of commitment, not to each other, but with each other to God. To use it for anything else, or to make it an end in itself, is to put it in the place of God. Moreover, the other may be stifled in the process. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes this contrast:

> Human love is directed to the other person for his own sake, spiritual love loves him for Christ's sake. Therefore, human love seeks a direct contact with the other person; it loves him not as a free person but as one whom it binds to itself. It wants to gain, to capture by every means; it uses force. It desires to be irresistible, to rule . . . . Spiritual love . . . comes from Jesus Christ; it knows that it has no immediate access to other persons.[10]

Many guides in the history of monasticism have not been fond of the idea that one monk should have a special friendship with another monk. They were afraid of cliques within the monastery, or of monks feeling themselves to be an out-group excluded from the in-group, or of a loyalty that was not a loyalty to the whole house. Charity encompasses all in its embrace, all alike.

> Cassian was not of this opinion. Personal friendships are inevitable and natural. They will not last if they rest on superficial resemblances of character or a temporary endeavor in a common task. They will last only if they rest on common moral qualities. If they so rest, they will be infinitely precious. (Luibheid, *introduction*)

If, in a friendship, the other becomes the be-all and end-all of life that other has taken the place of God. Possessive friendships are evil and self-defeating. Communion with others demands an openness and willingness to share our experience and also a degree of reticence and respect for the other's personality. Thomas Merton says:

> There is no true identity between souls who do not know how to respect one another's solitude. I cannot be united in love with a person whose very personality my love tends to obscure, to absorb, and to destroy. Nor can I awaken true love in a person who is invited, by my love, to be drowned in the act of drowning me with love. (*NMI*, p. 166)

Friendship with God and friendship with others is not mutually exclusive. Neither may be pursued at the expense of the other. Commitment to God in ordination does not exempt us or excuse us from commitment to our spouses in marriage. It used to be said by some clergy that their priesthood was an over-riding vocation and that family must take second place. That is completely wrong.

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10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*; translated with an introduction by John W. Dobenstein (London: SCM Press, 1954), pp. 24-25.

SOLITUDE

In one of his conferences to novices Thomas Merton ruminated:

> The community needs a hermit and I'm thankful they picked me to be it. . . . Ideally, the life of the hermit is the life in which all care is completely put aside, first of all because it is a death. It accepts completely the fact of death in life. It is a death to society and to certain consolations of society. It is a death to certain kinds of support. One does not go into solitude to practice a lot of virtues. If that is supposed to be what is happening I am probably not going to be able to make the grade. Solitude is undertaken in order to cast one's care upon the Lord. Let me read these sentences from Caussade which give the whole essence of it. This is applicable to the cenobitic as well as to the solitary life:
>
> > Self-abandonment is that continual forgetfulness of self which leaves the soul free to eternally love God, untroubled by those fears, reflections, regrets and anxieties which the care of one's own perfection and salvation gives . . . .
>
> The trouble with the monastic life is that it is supposed to be a life without care and we have filled it with care . . . . We are devoured with care; care about our jobs, care about our life of prayer, care about how we are getting on . . . . Here is a passage which seems to express what I am supposed to do and what we are all supposed to do: Since God offers to take upon himself the care of our affairs let us once for all abandon them to his infinite wisdom that we may never more be occupied with aught but him and his interests.[11]

This passage, taken in context, says a great deal about Merton and probably about human nature. Merton, as a well trained monk, understood the theory of solitude. He knew the importance of being alone with God and, sometimes, just alone. The paradox for Thomas Merton was that he genuinely saw his vocation to lie in a life of quiet prayer and contemplation, even that of a hermit, but he was constantly drawn, as I have said, to a life of prominence and activity.

Merton employs the example of someone living in a community for a number of years and then being able to look with satisfaction at his own contribution to its development. "I helped to build this place. I planted that tree." But there is more to it than that:

> When a community of people who are touched to the quick believes in the Spirit the freedom of the individual lives in the free decision of the common will brought about by the Spirit. The freedom in a community life is not just each one demanding for himself certain rights but every-

11. Thomas Merton, *The Merton Tapes / Series I: Life and Solitude* (Chappaqua, New York: Electronic Paperbacks, 1972), cassette tape TM-8.

> body creating for everbody [else] freedom in a common will in which they all contribute something, to which they decide to give their will without knowing what is going to come out and taking what comes out because we have all made this.

This is undoubtedly true but whether Merton ever experienced it in his bones is questionable. He *wanted* to be a monk. He wanted to lose himself in the monastic community. Or so he told himself. But he also wanted to pursue his inclinations as he saw them and to make his own distinctive contribution to his world. He struggled with the question on the eve of taking vows:

> This morning . . . it seemed to me that these vows will mean the renunciation of the pure contemplative life. If Jesus wants me to be here at Gethsemani, as my Superiors insist He does . . . then perhaps He does not want me to be a pure contemplative after all. I suppose it all depends on what you mean by a pure contemplative.
>
> I soon came to the conclusion that I could not think straight about the problem any way. Perhaps this is not the most perfect vocation in the Church, *per se*. Well, what about it? It seems to be *my* vocation. That is the thing that matters. What is the use of having some other vocation that is better in itself but is not your own vocation? But how can it be my vocation if I have such a strong desire for some other vocation? Don't ask me. Our Lord wants that sacrifice. How do I know? I don't know. That is what I am told. Do I have to believe them? I do not have to, I suppose. But something tells me that there is no other way for me. My conscience is on the side of my Superiors and anyway, when I have a moment of lucid thought on the subject, experience reminds me that these feelings will go away just as they have gone away before. No doubt they will come back again and go away again many times before I get used to forgetting them. (*SJ*, p. 25f)

This type of struggle continued until the end of his life. It would seem from his utterances and his writings that his retreat to the hermitage was prompted more by a desire to escape from a community which was not altogether congenial to him than to emulate the desert fathers. Nonetheless, he has something to teach us about Christian solitude.

Part of the human condition is often the fear of loneliness. We are afraid of being alone. We tend to see it as something unpleasant and unnatural. If we are lonely we feel that there is something wrong with us. We need to realize that there is a difference between physical loneliness and aloneness. Aloneness we call solitude. Solitude is a necessary part of the human condition. So far from isolating us from other people, it brings us into closer communion with them. It enables us to stand back and to see life in perspective. We need to be alone in order that we may enjoy community — which is a paradox.

No matter how much we may be part of the community we still remain as individuals. As individuals we shall sometimes be alone. In his book, *True Prayer*, Kenneth Leech has written:

> [Spirituality] involves the acceptance of our fundamental aloneness, not seeking to reduce it, not hoping that friendship, marriage, community or group will take it away. That aloneness is an integral part of being human, and an essential element in love. It is out of that aloneness that it becomes possible to *respond* rather than merely react to people and needs. Response has to grow and emerge out of the depths of myself: it is *my* response, born out of my inner struggle and inner self-knowledge, out of my spirit, my deepest core. That is what spirituality is about.[12]

Similarly, Henri J. M. Nouwen says:

> The movement from loneliness to solitude is not a movement of a growing withdrawal but is instead a movement toward a deeper engagement in the burning issues of our time. The movement from loneliness to solitude can make it possible to convert slowly our fearful reactions into a loving response.
>
> Compassion born in solitude makes us very much aware of our own historicity. We are not called to respond to generalities but to the concrete facts with which we are confronted day after day. A compassionate man can no longer look at these manifestations of evil and death as disturbing his life plan but rather has to confront them as an opportunity for the conversion of himself and his fellow human beings. Every time in human history that men and women have been able to respond to the events of their world as an occasion to change their hearts, an inexhaustible source of generosity and new life has been opened, offering hope far beyond the limits of human prediction.[13]

Solitude, and being a hermit, detaches one from the immediate and makes for a greater appreciation of the remote. Nouwen quotes from the experience of Thomas Merton in this connection:

> The paradox of Merton's life is indeed that his withdrawal from the world brought him into closer contact with it. The more he was able to convert his restless loneliness into a solitude of heart, the more he could discover the pains of his world in his own inner center and respond to them. His compassionate solidarity with the human struggle made him a spokesman for many who, although lacking his talent for writing, shared his solicitude. (Nouwen, p. 49)

There is, therefore, a balance to be sought between solitude and community. Looking at this whole matter of self, sexuality and solitude as

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12. Kenneth Leech, *True Prayer: An Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (London: Sheldon Press, 1980), p. 112.

13. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1986), p. 49. Hereafter referred to in the text as "Nouwen."

developed by Merton, we see that it begins with acceptance of self as the person is, without bitterness, without guilt, as God's creature. For Cassian and Merton, this does not rule out the hope of future improvement. It does not make for complacency or smug self-satisfaction, but it does avoid futile self-accusation. Given that experience of self-acceptance, we are then able to move on and to accept others and to accept our acceptance by God.