

IN GOD'S DESERT

by **Thomas Merton**

Translated from the French by **William H. Shannon**

Editor's Note: In preparing for his Springboard Address—"Solitude, Way to Reality: Reflections on Merton's 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude'"—at the Third General Meeting of ITMS, Msgr. William H. Shannon discovered that what he calls "this remarkable essay" went through at least three stages:

1. Stage 1: the French addition, *Dans le desert de Dieu* which was published in the March 1955 issue of *Temoignages* [Paris]. No English version of this French text has been discovered.
2. Stage 2: An expanded version of the French text called "The Solitary Life" and printed by Victor Hammer in a limited edition of fifty copies. This version was published in 1977 in *The Monastic Journey* (edited by Brother Patrick Hart) under the title "The Solitary Life" (pp. 151-162). A typescript almost identical with this version bears the title "Vocation to Silence."
3. Stage 3: A longer version which, after struggles with the censors, appeared in *Disputed Questions* in 1960 under the title "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude."

An English translation of stage 1 follows:

If a solitary discovers for himself a desert where he is unknown and where he is permitted to live and to remain unknown, he can still do more good for the human race than he would be able to do if he remained a prisoner of the society in which he lives.

It is true that physical solitude at times seems to take on the aspect of a bitter defeat. Physical solitude is not the earthly paradise which those imagine it to be who find it in the city or are able to be hermits for a few days or a few hours only. The call to perfect solitude is a call to suffering, darkness and desolation. But once a man is called to all of these, he prefers them and cares not about an earthly paradise.

The solitary who no longer communicates with other men except for the bare necessities of life is a man with a special and difficult task. He soon loses all sense of his significance for the rest of the world. And yet that significance is great. The hermit belongs more than ever to a world like ours that has degraded the human person and lost all respect for solitude. But in such a world the vocation of the hermit is more terrifying than ever. The hermit is one among us who seems to have "blown it." We have no place for him save in our vaguest dreams. We cannot tolerate him as a reality. He is too insignificant, too uncultured, too shabby, too poor. Even those who think of themselves as contemplatives have a secret contempt for hermits.

Nonetheless, the hermit is today the true model of the monk. The monastery today must keep its doors closed to the world and its windows open to the desert. The monk must be a person who fully realizes that the life of the desert is not just something useful or something they are not supposed to strive for. Nor is its usefulness merely a concession to human frailty and therefore not really a part of the monastic ideal.

William H. Shannon is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York. He is the author of *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*. He served as the first President of the ITMS and is General Editor of *The Merton Letters*.



WILLIAM H. SHANNON

It has never been either practical or useful to leave all things and follow Christ. And yet it is spiritually prudent. Practical utility and supernatural prudence are sometimes flatly opposed to one another, as wisdom of the flesh and prudence of more spiritual order. Practical utility has its roots in the present life, while prudence lives for the world to come. Practical utility is content with temporal values and goals. Prudence weighs all things in the balance of eternity. Values which are invisible and intangible have no weight for the practical person. The solitary life is something that cannot even tip his scales. Yet St. Paul says: "The foolish things of the world God hath chosen that he may confound the strong. And the base things of the world, and the things that are contemptible hath God chosen and things that are not, that he might bring to naught things that are." (I Corinthians 1:27, 28)

It is right that monks provide for their own subsistence by selling the things they produce. They should be able to do this without becoming involved in the affairs of worldly people. Practical utility has a just claim on their lives insofar as it serves supernatural prudence. But nonetheless practical utility disrupts monastic poverty, it ruins the action of prudence and roots the monk in this world instead of freeing him to take the route that leads to eternity. The hermit remains there to prove, by his lack of practical utility and the apparent sterility of his vocation, that cenobitic monks themselves ought to have little significance in the world, or indeed none at all. They are dead to the world and the world is dead to them. They are pilgrims in it, isolated witnesses of another kingdom.

It seems to me that the hermits have all the more a role to play in our world because he has no proper place in it.

The monk is not as much of an exile. People can understand and even appreciate him. From the moment that one thinks of the monastery as a "dynamo of prayer," the world is prepared to show, however begrudgingly, some respect to monks. For a dynamo produces something. And the energy of all these monks also produces something, so it seems. On the whole, monks claim to provide for their own needs. Perhaps they provide equally well for the spiritual needs of the world! But the hermit produces nothing.

The final and most telling criticism of the hermit is that often he is poorer than the cenobite even in the life of prayer. His is a weak and precarious existence, he has more cares, he is more insecure, he has to struggle to preserve himself from all kinds of petty annoyances, and often he fails to do so. His poverty is spiritual. It invades his whole soul as well as his body, and in the end there is nothing left but the insecurity, the sorrow, the spiritual and intellectual indigence of the truly poor. This is precisely the vocation of the hermit: a vocation to a state of inferiority, from every point of view, especially in terms of the spiritual view of things. It is not surprising that such a vocation has in it a grain of folly.

If to become a hermit means to be a hero, we might after all respect such a vocation. If it means simply being a tramp, even then some of us might accept it and perhaps see in it some element of contemplation, even if that amount to no more than preaching to the birds.

In the final analysis it may be that our hermit turns out not really to be a contemplative in any real sense of the word. The solitary life will be and must be a life of prayer, if one is to be an authentic hermit. But what prayer! Nothing more than bread and water this interior prayer of the hermit. It may be that he will have to fall back on very simple forms of vocal prayer. His meditation may be utter poverty. He will have moments when he will be unable to think at all except perhaps to wonder if he is going mad. But beneath all this he has the profound richness of an uninterrupted solitude. This is all he has and it is everything, for it contains God and enfolds him in God at every moment. So great is his poverty that he does not even see God at a distance. He is never far enough away from God to see Him in perspective. He is swallowed up in God and, therefore, so to speak, never sees God at all.

All that we can say about the indigence of the true hermit must not make us forget the fact that this person is happy in his solitude, the poverty of which is the very source of his happiness. He does not love poverty for its own sake or solitude for its own sake but he is supremely happy to be set aside, to be impoverished and to keep himself in the background for the sake of God's will. His silence is sometimes frightening yet it is more precious to him than anything else because it is saturated with the will of God. He could not break away from this will if he wanted to. To be prisoner of this love is to be free, and almost to be in paradise. Thus it is that

the life of solitude is a life of love without consolation, a life that is fruitful, because it is willed by God, and everything that is willed by God has an immense significance, even when it appears to make no sense at all.

The hermit remains in the world as a prophet to whom no one listens, as a voice crying in the desert, and as a sign of contradiction. The world rejects him, because there is nothing of the world in him. His mission is to be rejected by the world, which, in rejecting him and his solitude and his poverty, reveals its fear of the solitude of God.

But fear is always close to love, and therefore those who fear the solitary nonetheless allow themselves to be fascinated by him, because his very uselessness does not cease to proclaim that perhaps he does have after all a function to perform, though it may seem to be incomprehensible.

His function is to be in the midst of the world, as solitary, as poor and as unacceptable as God is in the souls of so many people. He is there to tell them in a way they can barely understand that, if they were only able to know and appreciate their own inner solitude, they would immediately discover God and find out, for the first time in their lives, that they are really persons.

The habitual argument of those who protest against exterior solitude is that it is not only dangerous but totally unnecessary. What really matters, they say, is interior solitude. And this can be obtained without physical isolation.

There is in this statement a truth more terrifying than can be imagined by those who make it: namely, that true solitude, which involves a mysterious attachment to God, must not be confused with an egotistic isolationism. There are some contemplatives who in effect set themselves to seek and find solitude in the midst of community, by renouncing concern for the rest of their brothers who simply serve to assure them a good life that is truly calm and peaceful. Their solitude is consoling; it is certain. But if it is certain, it is not really solitude. If it ceases to be certain, they will leave it for something else. This is the point where the terrible irony of true interior solitude begins.

For when the Lord calls you to be a solitary, he will make you a solitary wherever you are. Even if you find yourself surrounded by the assistance and comfort of your brothers, gradually the bonds that unite you with them are broken, one by one, by an invisible hand. You become like a ship which is detached from its moorings and which slips away from port in the middle of the night and you are not able to return to land.

At such a time it is a great relief to be put in contact with others by some simple task, some function of the ministry. You realize that you can no longer bridge the gap between you and other persons. And at the same time you realize that you love them more than ever. Made humble by your solitude and grateful for the work which brings relief to your poverty and puts you in contact with others, you yet remain in solitude. There is no greater solitude than that of an instrument of God that knows that his words and his ministry can in no wise change the fact of his loneliness.