

Solitary Life in the Shadow of a Cistercian Monastery

By Thomas Merton

In an essay dated October, 1966, Thomas Merton wrote about life as a Cistercian hermit, which at that time he had been living for a little more than a year. It was evidently composed at the request of a French monastic magazine, published by the Abbaye Saint-Martin in Vienne, where it appeared in translation as part of an issue devoted to the solitary life ("La Vie Solitaire à l'ombre d'un monastère cistercien," La Lettre de Ligugé #121 [Jan./Feb. 1967] 30-36). It was not published under his own name but simply as by "un Cistercien." Merton's authorship was revealed by the editors only in 1969 after his death, though the details found in the essay itself would have made it clear to anyone at all familiar with Merton's current life that he was indeed the author. The following year it appeared in Spanish translation in the journal Cistercium 22 (July/Sept. 1970) 205-13, as written by "un Cisterciense," but with a note identifying Merton as the author. In 1983, the original English version was prepared for publication in a new periodical called The Monastic Journal, with an introduction by Thomas Merton Center Director Robert E. Daggy (from which much of this information has been taken), but there is no evidence that



it was ever actually published. As a reflection on his eremitical experience, written shortly after his permanent commitment to this vocation (on September 8, 1966) following the end of his romantic attachment to "M," the student nurse, in the spring and summer of 1966, it is a particularly revelatory and significant document. It is therefore published here, as far as is known, for the first time in English, very lightly edited for consistency in capitalization, punctuation, etc. Gratitude is due to the trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust for permission to publish this article in the Seasonal, and to Dr. Paul M. Pearson, current Director of the Bellarmine Merton Center, for his assistance in locating and providing relevant materials.

At a time when the solitary life is being permitted in the Cistercian Order only *ad experimentum*, a simple “*temoignage*” should not attempt to be a justification, still less an advertisement, for eremitism. Consequently these brief notes will present no more than a simple personal report, which will confine itself to essential facts. Nevertheless, some basic principles may be necessary to clarify the writer’s position.

1. Monastic tradition both in the West and the East has always honored vocations to desert solitude, including vocations which demand a passage from the common life to eremitism, either temporary or permanent. The sometimes exaggerated fear of eremitism seems to come from a too exclusively *institutional* view of the question. How can the solitary life be safely organized and controlled? How can the hermit be prevented from becoming a gyrovague or a rebel? Historically, as chapter one of St. Benedict’s *Rule* indicates, such problems have certainly existed. But one cannot understand and appreciate the hermit *vocation* purely in the light of *false vocations* or infidelities. Certainly, true vocations must be tried and tested over a long period of time. But it would be wrong to assume that in every case the desire of solitude is an illusion and to conclude that there is only one genuine monastic way for men of our time: the way of the cenobite. This assumption is often made on the grounds that the hermit is somehow “too free” because he is no longer subject to a completely regulated institutional life. But the charism of solitude implies precisely the capacity to live a life that is not completely organized according to patterns designed for somebody else. The hermit must be one who is capable of living virtuously and fruitfully on his own, without constant surveillance and total control by others. It is true that many who believe themselves capable of doing this will soon find out, in solitude, that they were deluded.

2. The problem of deciding a vocation to solitude, in each case, is to be worked out by the monk in obedience to his spiritual father, normally his abbot. A suitable solution must be sought in the light of the peculiar circumstances, which may vary greatly. Each case is to be decided on its own merits.

3. In modern monastic history the formula of a *transitus* to another order where eremitism is organized and regulated (Carthusians, Camaldolese) had finally come to be regarded as the only solution. More recently, and especially since the Council, the renewal of the hermit life within monastic orders themselves has made it possible for a monk to live as a hermit near his own monastery, following an approved personal adaptation of the monastic rule.

4. Even the Order of Cîteaux, traditionally cenobitic, in its Golden Age knew a flowering of the solitary life, and today the Cistercians are once again permitting a few monks to enjoy greater solitude, either within the framework of the common life, or apart from the monastery but under the jurisdiction of the abbot. This has certain advantages. The monk does not have to obtain a *transitus* to another order, make a new novitiate, adapt himself to a whole new set of usages and acquire a different spirit. He lives in solitude, but in continuity with his previous monastic life, as a member of the community of his profession, from which he is not totally separated. If the experiment does not succeed, he can return without difficulty to the community, or perhaps work out some other solution with his spiritual father. The monk is able to arrange for himself a *horarium* which, though in principle roughly similar to that of the community, takes account of his own particular spiritual needs. In many cases, a simple modification of the common life will provide sufficient solitude: it can easily be arranged for a monk to work in solitude, or to do

his reading in solitude. He may perhaps be dispensed at times from attendance at some of the common exercises, for instance on a weekly or monthly private day of recollection. This may be all that many monks require in order to give themselves more freely to prayer and *lectio*. This will enable them to return more profitably to the common life which remains their true vocation. Others may be called to a more completely solitary life, but it is understood that in the Cistercian Order these will be exceptional, and that permissions for them to be partial or total hermits will only be granted rarely and after many years of profession. In the case of younger monks, if a genuine vocation to complete solitude develops early, it might be more normal for them to go to a colony of hermits for instance, if the new development makes itself evident before solemn profession. A postulant who presents himself with clear aspirations for a solitary life should probably not be accepted by the Cistercians on the assumption that he might later become a hermit. He should probably try elsewhere.

With these principles in mind, we can understand that there is no intention of modifying the essence of the Cistercian life. What follows is then the account of an exceptional situation.

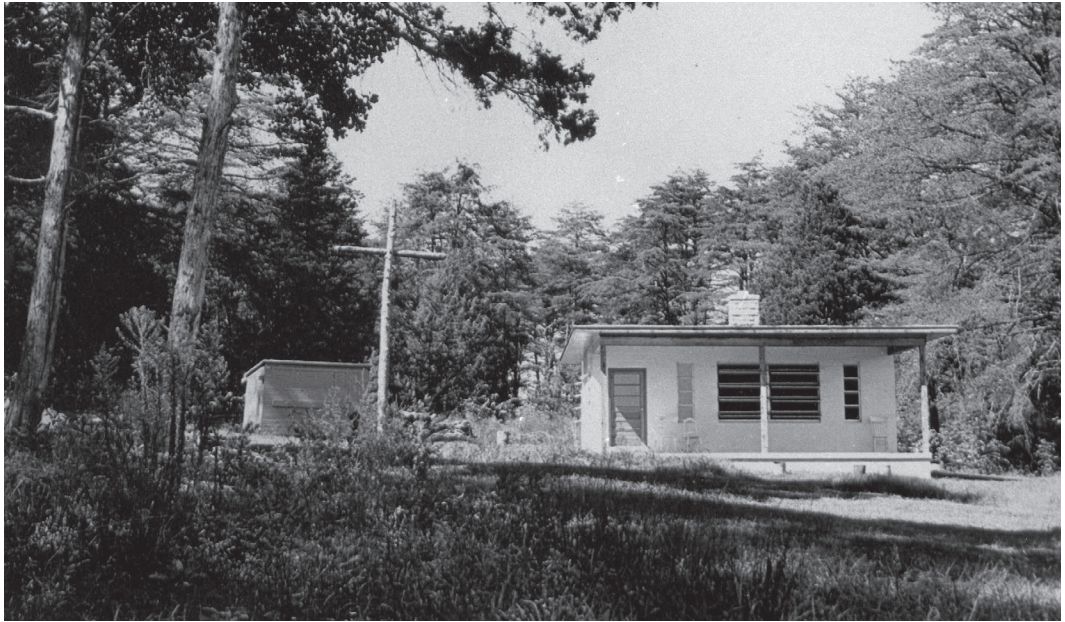
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I entered the monastery of my profession because it was at that time a very isolated place – it still is, comparatively – very silent and very “contemplative.” Ideally speaking, a Cistercian monastery should have an almost “eremitical” character of isolation and quiet. In the *Exordium Parvum*, the New Monastery of Cîteaux is several times referred to as “*eremus*.” When I entered my monastery twenty-five years ago I felt that I was in an *eremus*. The atmosphere of the “desert” prevailed. But anyone who has experience of a large busy monastery today with its industry, its mechanized farm, its continual building programs, its innumerable community enterprises and projects, its need for many responsible officers, etc., will realize that such a monastery does not quite provide the silence and solitude of the desert. Certainly a true monastic and contemplative life remains possible. But in order to make it easier, it is necessary to adapt the cadres of the common life and make them more flexible. Hence at this monastery one is permitted to go into the woods where there is more silence. One is not bound to do his *lectio* in a common scriptorium, cloister or garden.

Meanwhile, recent adjustments in the community *horarium* have left room for a certain amount of personal freedom, and many monks are now able to spend almost half a day in quiet, solitary prayer or in *lectio* when other more urgent duties do not occupy them.

For about ten years before this adjustment, due to the nature of my work, I had been able to spend a considerable part of the day alone. This was readily granted me by my Father Abbot because he knew of my desire for greater solitude. I was happy to work in quiet prayerful conditions.

Six years ago I obtained permission to work and spend part of the day in a small hermitage. Finally, two years ago, I obtained permission to sleep in the hermitage, and fifteen months ago I was dispensed from all community exercises in order to live there day and night. I am now fifty-one years old. For over fifteen years I held various offices in the community. Another priest of this monastery received the same permission two months ago. He is younger than I, and was formerly prior. So there are now two of us living as hermits in the woods near the monastery of our profession. We are about a mile apart.



My hermitage is about ten minutes' walk from the monastery on a small hill, hidden by woods, looking over a valley. It is outside the papal enclosure but in a part of the monastery property where seculars never come. One rarely sees anyone here, even a monk. It is understood that other members of the community normally do not visit the hermits in their dwellings. Exception is made in the case of the superiors and the cellarer. The other hermit and I go down to the monastery late in the morning to say Mass in a small chapel and to take the main meal of the day. This makes cooking in the hermitage unnecessary and means that there is not much problem disposing of garbage which would attract rats, etc. On the other hand, we may perhaps eventually say Mass in our hermitages. Having tried my hand at cooking, I think I will not risk ruining my stomach by eating food which I have myself prepared but will continue to take dinner in the community. Of course laundry and other needs are taken care of at the monastery. This is a great advantage which a "monastic hermit" has over one who is living entirely on his own.

The hermit goes to bed and gets up about the same time as the community, which retires at seven p.m. and rises at two-fifteen a.m. After rising and office I have three to four hours of prayer and *lectio*, followed by manual work for about two hours – necessary work around the hermitage: cleaning, wood-cutting, etc. Then more of the office followed by Mass and dinner at the monastery, after which I return to the hermitage for my regular work by which I attempt to support myself. When this is finished for the day, I usually go for walk in the woods, say more office, have supper, and then spend the rest of the evening before bedtime in prayer and *lectio*. The personal *horarium* of each hermit is approved by the Father Abbot. It is understood that the hermits remain in all things under obedience to the abbot and to the *Rule*. They cannot leave the monastic property without his permission or speak to anyone without his authorization. Neither of us hears confessions in

the community, but I am still asked to give one conference a week to the students and novices, on Sunday afternoon.

What remains to be said? Simply this: after more than twenty years of desire for solitude, including several requests to transfer to other orders (my superiors never allowed me to transfer), I find myself in a situation which is better than any I could have hoped for anywhere else. It would be an understatement to say that I enjoy the peace of one who has found his true vocation. I am bewildered by the goodness of God. I seek only to thank Him, and to take better advantage of the opportunity which is so rare and so perfect. It seems to me that this life I am now living is what I was really seeking when I entered the monastery. *Haec requies mea in saeculum saeculi* ["This is my rest forever" (Ps. 131[132]:14)]. *In nidulo meo moriar* ["I shall die in my nest" (Job 29:18)]. The mere fact of living alone does not solve all problems, but it has certainly simplified them for me. I no longer have the slightest desire to go elsewhere. In a sense the life is more difficult than that of the community. One would not want it otherwise. Certainly one can be lonely, confused, depressed at times, and one can make absurd mistakes. The solitary life must not be foolishly idealized. It is not a life of constant consolation and unending light. There are moments not only of darkness but of real spiritual peril. At such times one can truly realize his own weakness and helplessness in the presence of formidable and mysterious enemies. One knows with inner certitude that to face such enemies without the support of grace and obedience, without the blessing and approval of the Church, would be truly disastrous. At such times it is good to realize that one is still a member of one's monastic community and still enjoys the benefit of its prayers, of its material and spiritual





aid and of its discipline. Yet one comes to understand that the greatest blessings and strength are found precisely by remaining in silence and solitude and not being troubled. “Stay in your cell,” the Desert Fathers said, “and your cell will teach you all things.” I become more convinced of this each day – if by “cell” one may also understand the neighboring woodlands.

I do not want to paint a rosy picture of the solitary life that will create illusions. What may be possible in one monastery may not be equally possible in another, and what may seem good for one monk may not be suitable for another. It is most important to respect a kind of “organic” unity in one’s monastic vocation. Once one has become a professed member of a community, he normally shares in its advantages and disadvantages, its fortunes and vicissitudes, seeing in all these the wise and loving action of God’s Fatherly Providence. There may be monasteries where a complete eremitical solitude might be impossible. Perhaps in such cases a partial solitude may have to suffice – or the eventual solitude of old age in the infirmary.

To those who feel in themselves a craving for solitude I can only say this: do not trust your hunger and do not insist too hard on satisfying your own desire. Solitude is a gift of God and not a work of man. I know from my own experience that the solitude which I now enjoy would never have been mine if I had been able merely to follow my own will. It was precisely because I did not insist on doing what I preferred that I have finally been able to reach this solution which I never anticipated and which was arrived at not by myself alone but by cooperation with superiors and with my community. It seems to me that my Father Abbot and the community are all as satisfied with this solution as I am myself, for we all, to some extent, arrived at it together. The real beauty of being a hermit in the shadow of my own monastery is the awareness that one is there, as one should be, through the “mercy of God and the Order” – *per misericordiam Dei et Ordinis*.

Yet I realize that in the Cistercian Order this solution will remain rare and exceptional. It may be the answer to the problems of a few monks, but it certainly does not by itself solve any of the problems of the Order, which center in the renewal of the common life. Nevertheless, a greater flexibility in allowing temporary and partial solitude in the framework of the common life will doubtless help many communities to realize a greater capacity for tranquillity and interior prayer. In a word, the fact that the windows of the monastery are open to receive the fresh air of the forest will do no harm to the common life and will enable it to preserve its truly Cistercian character of silence, solitude, austerity and prayer.

A Cistercian