

The Dangers of Solitude*

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Growing up in England, and I refuse to say how many years ago, I remember a particular candy that we loved. I think it was called a "canon-ball," but essentially it was a sphere about the size of a marble, which, when sucked, would gradually release a fizzy fruit-flavored sherbet into one's mouth. However, if one bit into it there was a sudden release tantamount to an explosion in one's mouth frequently beyond containment, so that the frothing juice flowed down one's chin. An innocent looking candy with an explosive effect! In Thomas Merton's essay "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" I would suggest we have something similar. An innocent looking piece, but as one bites into it one becomes aware of its explosive content.

My reflections here are to address the dangers of solitude, and I begin by indicating what I hope to achieve and how I intend to pro-

* The five papers that constitute the following section are revisions of presentations made at the Third General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society at Colorado College, June 8-10, 1993. One of the principal speakers for that meeting was William H. Shannon, who used Merton's essay "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" as the basis for his major address about that subject. An expanded version of that speech appears in *Cisterian Studies Quarterly*.

Various speakers prepared responses to Shannon's paper. Two of those responses have been revised for publication here. These essays, by David Belcastro and Patrick Eastman, demonstrate that Merton's thinking about the need for solitude stimulated discussion along a wide range of issues. Interestingly, within the context of needed balance between contemplative withdrawal and involvement in (and for) a wider world, Shannon, and his respondents, stressed that solitude should never be only for the solitary self. Paradoxically, solitude is always a means of building connections with, and for, others.

ceed. First let me say that I do not intend to present a detailed analysis of Merton's essay. I wish rather to indicate how Merton's article stands firmly within the Christian tradition, not merely for monks but in a sense within the spirituality of all people. (Parenthetically it can also be noted that the vocation to solitude is a universal call and is clearly not restricted to monks or to the Christian tradition.) I shall say something about the Christian spiritual tradition and the way Merton's article can be located within it, and then I hope to show how we are called to embrace this essential feature of spirituality with all its inherent danger.

It is well known that Merton frequently had trouble with the censors, and this was no exception. There are two issues that arise out of that controversy, which are pertinent to our discussion here. First, there is the tension between the eremitic and the cenobitic lifestyles. This is an age-old issue that goes back to some of the earliest times in the Christian Church. The eremitic life is recorded positively for us in Athanasius' account of the life of Antony and the cenobitic life is given its ratification from the *koinōnia* of Pachomius. The two different lifestyles are portrayed as prime examples of the way to engage in the spiritual journey. Both are seen as a refining process, but through Evagrius' writing in the fourth century and copied into the writings of John Cassian in the fifth the tension continues, giving way ultimately to an underlying acceptance of the superiority of the solitary life. Basil, on the other hand, clearly favors the cenobitic tradition. Each of these aforementioned great writers have, as you may well know, influenced St. Benedict, and to a certain extent the tension is still there in his Rule, but the shift from Cassian is that within the tension it is the cenobitic life that now claims priority. The Cistercian reform of Benedictine monastic life of the twelfth century was an attempt to once again affirm the value of a desert spirituality, most explicitly expressed by the solitary life. The initial reform and the subsequent reform of LaTrappe endeavored to establish an eremitical element to the life within the context of community. I believe the problems the censors had with the text under examination here reflects clearly the tension between the communal and solitary life, which has been there throughout the history of Christian spirituality.

I mentioned earlier that there are two issues that I perceive raised in this censor problem. The second one seems to be that of power and control. And in this I think we are led right to the explosive heart of

the article. This is precisely where the danger lies. Notice here that I have used the singular because I see not "dangers" in the solitary life so much as a single danger, which can manifest itself in all sorts of ways. The danger is portrayed in the *Life of Antony*, to which I have already referred; it was there for Merton as it is there for contemporary hermits or indeed for us all. Apart from a short stay in a hermitage a few years ago I have had no personal experience of the solitary life. Even that short immersion was very demanding and can be typified as a time of real struggle rather than a nice rest with some peace and quiet. But without any real experience myself, I asked three people who live as hermits today what their thoughts were on the dangers of solitude. Out of their remarkably varied experience there emerged one central danger under which all the other items could be subsumed. The real danger is the carrying of one's ego-centeredness into the solitude. This could manifest itself in terms of moving away from a Christ-centeredness, or an overwhelming abhorrence of one's sinfulness with an inordinate desire for penance or a constant concern about one's contribution to community and society.

I want now to take us behind this danger of ego-centeredness to ascertain its provenance. In order to do this we need to look at Scripture. If we examine the creation stories in Genesis carefully we notice the temptation to which Adam and Eve, as representatives of all humanity, surrender. They are tempted to be "like God," in other words to be a "self-creation" rather than a creature. We might say that this ego-self claims an illegitimate autonomy rather than existing as a true self under the authority of and in union with the creator God. But this ego-centered self, or perhaps we can use Merton's term of the "false self," has no real identity. It is nothing more than an illusion. So how, one might ask, does this false self establish its identity? I think we can get some answer to this if we look at the gospel account of Jesus' own first solitary experience. After his baptism we read that the Holy Spirit leads Jesus out into the wilderness. It may be worth noting here that Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit, and that the call to the solitary life throughout the ages is always God's initiative. Indeed, we must never forget that the ONLY authentic orientation in the spiritual journey is where God initiates and the human person responds.

We also do well to remember the place of the wilderness in the Hebrew Bible. As Dianne Bergant pointed out in a recent article in *The Bible Today*, "It is clear from the way the wilderness is depicted in the

Bible that it was a place to be feared rather than treasured."¹ The desert, while being a place of encounter with God, also represents the place of radical dependence upon God rather than on self. It is the place of the demons that can only be overcome by a surrender to God. It is, in other words, a dangerous place to be. So solitude, as experienced in the desert, is even recognized in our Sacred Scriptures as being dangerous. If we proceed with our examination of the pericope on Jesus' experience in this dangerous wilderness we hear that he is tempted three times. Now I personally think there is more to these three temptations than it being just a nice story about the way Satan tempted Jesus. Is there not something of a universal paradigm here with the story conveying something fundamental to the whole human condition? Let us look at the three temptations again. First, Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread. Does bread here represent security or possessions? The second temptation is to jump off the Temple roof and win the esteem of all the people through such an impressive show. The third temptation is to worship Satan in order to gain power and control. So the temptations are to possessions, prestige, and power. None of these things are bad in themselves but only become a problem when they become compulsive and are used to give identity to this false self. The false self usurps the energy associated with possessions, power, and prestige to create identity from what it has or does as a separate entity.

The distractions to which Merton refers in his notes on solitude surely emanate from this ego-centeredness struggling to create an illusion of its own existence apart from God. One of the greatest yet almost totally unrecognized spiritual writers of the fourth century was Evagrius Ponticus. Drawing from the philosophical tradition of theology that he learned from Origen and from his own experience in the Egyptian desert, he demonstrates how these three energy centers manifest themselves in eight harmful thoughts (these are the basis of what eventually emerge through Thomas Aquinas as the seven deadly sins). Evagrius lists them as Pride, Avarice, Impurity, Vainglory, Gluttony, Anger, Sadness, and Acedia. John Cassian takes over the ideas of Evagrius, and through him they enter into the whole Western monastic tradition. Now the way to overcome these thoughts that emerge

1. Dianne Bergant, C.S.A., "The Desert in Biblical Tradition," *The Bible Today*, vol. 31, no. 3 (May 1993) 138.

into the consciousness, says Evagrius, is through *lectio divina*, recitation of the psalms and the pure prayer of silence in stillness. Here the Christian West is linked to the Hesychast tradition of Eastern Christendom, and both traditions demand a silence, stillness, and solitude for the exigencies of the ego-centered false self to be diminished. So we may say that the distractions and the dangers to which Merton refers relate to the eight harmful thoughts of Evagrius and the struggles of Antony with his demons, so colorfully described by Athanasius. We may also say that there is a link here with the non-Christian East's awareness of the dangers of dualism. The Ego-self makes a determined effort to establish a separate identity, so a nondualism can only be effected when the ego-centeredness of the self is removed. Is nondualism part of the Christian tradition? Surely it is, and the task can only be complete when, with Jesus, the practitioner can say, "The Father and I are one," or with St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives within me." Clearly the call to solitude is a call to give consent to divine action within us and to actively cooperate with the transforming of our innermost being.

So, if the refining process of solitude is so essential wherein lie the dangers? I think we can see how easy it would be in a very perverse way for this ego- or I-maker to take over the whole project. The enterprise is flawed from the beginning because the venture into solitude becomes nothing more than an ego-trip. The ego remains firmly in control, and whether the solitude lasts for a matter of minutes carved out of a busy day or in the monastic cell or in a hermitage, the false self is fully yet deceptively in charge. T. S. Eliot gives us commentary on this in the poem "East Coker":

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.²

When the ego still reigns supreme even if the call to the solitary life is authentically from God, then the danger begins in a rugged in-

2. T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 126.

dividualism that so marks our culture. It is true that there can be no contemplation without asceticism, but in this case the asceticism is a self-controlled discipline rather than a self-surrender to the refining power of God.

The dangers that caused concern for Merton's censors, I think, lie in this area of control. Merton's article challenged their own addictive attachment to power and control. Merton, in Asia during the last weeks of his life, remarks that the time has come for us all to stand on our own two feet. He points out that we can no longer rely on the institutions to do that which we need to do ourselves. We have to take responsibility for our own lives. Now the danger is that the ego-centered self usurps control, in which case little or no progress has been made. Of course, the other side is that those who have the control in the institution become very threatened when their power is taken away. It seems to me that there is a sense in which we all have to stand alone, we have to be responsible for our own lives as creatures surrendered to the creator God. Again, in words of T. S. Eliot:

Descend lower, descend only
Into the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy.³

The dynamic of this movement toward personal responsibility is, we are told, part of the process of human maturation. We move on our life's journey from a reliance on the institution or society to give us our identity to an acceptance of who we are as created by God. Someone recently remarked that they thought one could make an analogy between the Church as the body of Christ and an individual human person's development, with each hundred years of the Church being one year in a human life. So the Church's development in human terms is that of a twenty year old. A somewhat speculative thought maybe, but as part of the body we have the responsibility not only for the fruits of genuine solitude to be effected in our own lives but in the life of all creation. There is the danger that the desire for solitude is nothing

3. Eliot, "Burnt Notion," *The Complete Poems and Plays*, 120.

more than a flight from our place within society. False contemplation, false solitude, is an avoidance of others, whereas a genuine contemplation or solitude leads us to a deeper solidarity with others. As Merton remarks in the introduction to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "the monastery [we could put solitude here] is not an escape from the world. On the contrary, by being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world."⁴ In other words, it is an immersion into the concerns of creation at a different level, away from the illusions of those solutions that really only serve to bring an even deeper alienation from God.

So what of this for us? The solitude expressed in the word "monk" is not for a select few, but the monk, as Raimundo Panikkar points out, is a universal archetype. Whatever the inherent dangers, we cannot avoid facing them because the dangers are not to be avoided—nor can they be avoided. The dangers as I have suggested them are an integral part of the whole process of our engagement with the paschal mystery that will bring about union with God.

And it is the purity of the intention that counts. We are all called to solitude in one way or another, and we have to face it at our death whether we like it or not. Against our ego-self we must remember that it is not a matter of our achievement of a hoped-for end. As Eliot writes in "East Coker":

And do not think of the fruit of the action . . .
For us there is only the trying.
The rest is not our business.

When we allow it to be something other than a self-seeking achievement or lifestyle, then the inevitable and essential dangers become the very stuff that God uses in that process of inner transformation that takes place beyond our human knowing or striving.

4. Thomas Merton, *Introductions East & West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Greensboro: Unicorn, 1981) 45.