

The Camaldolese Way

By Thomas Merton

On May 4, 1953, Thomas Merton wrote a letter to Dom Anselmo Giabbani, the prior of the Italian monastery of Camaldoli, who had apparently inquired if Merton could write a book on this eremitic form of Benedictine monasticism, to which Merton himself was much attracted.¹ He replied:

As to a book by Thomas Merton – I have neither the time nor the material to write a full-length volume on the Camaldolese ideal but it is possible that I might obtain permission to produce a short booklet. My suggestion is that the burden of your message should be presented in pictures. If you can provide a hundred good photographs of Camaldolese life against the beautiful background of your mountain forest, all that will be needed from me will be about fifty pages of text. I do not say I have received permission to do such a work, and it would have to wait a while in any case. But perhaps I could obtain this permission. (Grayston 75-76)

Nothing came of this request at the time, but in February 1955 Merton sent to Dom Giabbani a version of a text, including an extensive section on the Camaldolese, that was originally written for the primitive Benedictine community of La Pierre-qui-Vire in France to accompany a collection of photographs on monastic life (see Grayston 91-93). That book, published as *Silence dans le Ciel*² in French and as *Silence in Heaven*³ in English, actually used only a small portion of Merton's original text, not including his discussion of the Camaldolese, and Merton subsequently reworked and augmented the remaining material into what became *The Silent Life*.⁴ Meanwhile the Camaldolese published an Italian translation of the material they had been sent as *Vita nel Silenzio*.⁵ (This publication, which had not been submitted to the Trappist censors, caused a good deal of trouble for Merton with the Cistercian Abbot General, Dom Gabriel Sortais, especially because it lacked the additional material included in *The Silent Life* in order to satisfy the objections of the American censors to what they considered an overemphasis on the hermit life – represented by Camaldoli in particular – though Merton made clear to Dom Gabriel that he himself was unaware of and not responsible for this omission.⁶)

Sometime in 1957, Morcelliana, the Italian publisher of *Vita nel Silenzio*, also published a 28-page illustrated booklet in English entitled *The Camaldolese Way*,⁷ which constitutes the realization of the project originally broached by Dom Giabbani back in 1953. It is likely that the reason for issuing this text was to make available an introduction to the Camaldolese life in English at a time when the Order was about to make its first American foundation at New Camaldoli in Big Sur, California in 1958. Basically consisting of the original English version of the chapter on the Camaldolese that Merton had sent to Dom Giabbani in February 1955, it represents a somewhat different state of the text from that found in *The Silent Life*.⁸ There is no documentary evidence that Merton was aware of plans to publish this extremely rare volume, which is mentioned in none of the Merton bibliographies, or even that he knew of its existence subsequent to its appearance. Though it seems probable that the booklet would have been sent to him when it was published, no copy is

extant either in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University or at the Abbey of Gethsemani, so if Merton received it he evidently took care to keep its existence hidden, lest it renew Dom Gabriel's ire at unauthorized, uncensored publication.⁹ This virtually unknown version of Merton's text on the Camaldolese, made available through the kindness of Albert Romkema, who now owns the only copy of *The Camaldolese Way* that is known to be extant, is published below in corrected and edited form,¹⁰ with the permission of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust. It is followed by a textual appendix listing all the variants between this version and the chapter on the Camaldolese found in *The Silent Life*, using the original page numbers of the pamphlet as inserted in the version provided here.

1. For a detailed treatment of Merton's interest in the Camaldolese and efforts to obtain a transfer to Camaldoli, including the complete extant correspondence between Merton and Giabbani along with related documentation, see Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015); subsequent references will be cited as "Grayston" parenthetically in the text.
2. *Silence dans le Ciel*, texts et illustrations choisis et mis en page par les moines de la Pierre-qui-Vire (Paris: Éditions Arthaud, 1955).
3. *Silence in Heaven: A Book of the Monastic Life* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1956 / New York: Studio Publications, 1956).
4. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957).
5. Thomas Merton, *Vita nel Silenzio*, trans. M. R. Cimnaghi (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1956).
6. See Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 99-101 (letter of February 9 [misdated February 7], 1957), in which Merton explains to the Abbot General that because he had not been allowed to correspond with Dom Giabbani during the period when the Italian translation was going through the press he was completely unaware of what arrangements had or had not been made. Merton had evidently forgotten that he was permitted to write one letter in March 1956 to Giabbani about the publication of *Vita nel Silenzio* (see Grayston 159-60), but this letter otherwise confirms his account to Dom Gabriel that he had arranged to have the updated text sent to Giabbani.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Camaldolese Way* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1957).
8. Most of these differences are due to the handwritten alterations made by Merton on his original typescript of this section that he sent for retyping to Mrs. Ann Skakel, who had volunteered to arrange for a clean copy to be made. The material found on the second page of Merton's original typescript (equivalent to but not exactly identical with the text found on pages 146-47 of *The Silent Life* ["in writing a rule . . . extreme asceticism."]) is missing from the text of *The Camaldolese Way*; it is virtually certain that this was due to an accidental loss of this page at some stage of its transmission. This material has been restored in brackets in the text below. There are a few other minor discrepancies between the typescript and this published version which are probably due to handwritten changes Merton made on the retyped version before sending it to Dom Giabbani.
9. The booklet specifies on the verso of its title page that it was published "With Ecclesiastical Approval," which probably refers to the initial Imprimatur given to *Vita nel Silenzio* (since it is unlikely that Italian Church officials would have reviewed the English-language text), and which certainly does not refer to Trappist censorship.
10. The text has been checked against Merton's original typescript, now in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY, and appropriate corrections have been incorporated. See Appendix II below for a list of these emendations.

* * * * *

[9] All that has been said in these pages points to the fact that the monastic life is above all a life of deep spiritual peace and fruitfulness, which gives us, even on earth, a foretaste of the peace of heaven. But we have also come to understand that the peace of the monastic life is not a material peace, not a state of comfortable inertia, guaranteed by the absence of all cares and responsibilities.

Concerning a peace which gratifies the body rather than the soul, Christ said only that He came to bring “not peace but the sword.” The peace of the monk is proportionate to his detachment from the things of earth. And detachment is not to be won without a strenuous battle. The Pax monastica is the peace not of one who finds all his earthly desires and needs taken care of in a satisfactory manner, but of one who has liberated himself by the grace of God and by ascetic combat, from material things, and concentrated his whole life on a search for the Kingdom of God. He is free, with the liberty of the sons of God. His peace is not of this world. It is hidden with Christ in God.

The monastic life is the more hidden in proportion as it is humble, solitary and poor. The monk is by nature alienated from the apostolic ministry of preaching, as well as from prelacies and dignities that would keep him before the eyes of men. If he is, [10] like the Apostles, a “spectacle to angels and to men” it can only be as an example of obscure poverty from which the world tends to turn away without understanding. But the monk has in his heart an aspiration for an ever greater solitude, and poverty and humility. If the dispositions of divine Providence may involve him, for a time, in work that places him before the public, he knows that this is purely accidental, and that the essence of his vocation remains the same: it is always a call to solitude, obscurity and self-renunciation. It is a call to the desert.

St. Benedict, in his profound wisdom, realized that all men could not follow his own example and pass immediately from the turbulent cities to the rocky valleys of the wilderness. Not all men are capable of living alone in caves. And it is not necessary to live in a cleft of the rocks, to become a monastic saint. [In writing a rule for cenobites, in which all the emphasis is placed on humility and obedience, and in which the spirit of the desert is maintained and made accessible to all, St. Benedict succeeded in transplanting the monastic ideal of the Egyptian desert to European soil. Not only that, but he ensured the permanent survival of the desert ideal. He was only able to do so by tempering some of the austerities of the hermits of the Thebaid, and prudently softening the rigors of Pachomian cenobitism. The Benedictine monastery is essentially a family rather than a military camp, although Benedict himself is not afraid to use an occasional martial metaphor.

But we must never suppose, as is sometimes supposed, that in prudently adapting the observances of the Egyptian monks to European needs, St. Benedict was in any way repudiating the primitive monastic ideal. On the contrary, the *raison d'être* of his adaptation is to be sought in the ideal itself which he sought to preserve. The Rule of St. Benedict, which so often quotes the great monastic rules and traditions of the East, and which relies so heavily on Cassian, the popularizer of Oriental monachism, is written for monks who are to live in the direct line of the pure, ancient tradition. The monk who vows obedience under the Rule of St. Benedict is therefore the true descendant of St. Anthony of the desert as well as of St. Pachomius and of St. Basil. He enters upon the monastic life as a cenobite, indeed: but there is nothing in the very nature of his vocation itself to exclude a deep admiration for the ancient hermits, or to prevent his desiring to share something of their solitary contemplation of God. On the contrary, if the monk were to sever all the spiritual bonds which tie him to the Desert Fathers, he would be cutting himself off from the pure and primitive source of his monastic spirit. He would be depriving himself of the substantial nourishment which St. Benedict himself saw to be necessary for his soul. But for this nourishment to profit his soul he must do what was done by St. Benedict himself, and distinguish the essentials of the monastic life (the spirit of self-renunciation to seek God) from the accidentals (extraordinary bodily mortifications and the practice of extreme asceticism).]

The fact that St. Benedict considers the cenobites to be the “strongest breed” (*fortissimum genus*) among monks, does not mean that he either excludes or underestimates the anchorites. On the contrary, as a representative of the authentic tradition in this matter, he takes it for granted that some monks, after long testing in the cenobium, will want to go off into solitude and will receive permission to do so. This implicit orientation of the Rule of St. Benedict towards eremitical solitude, which is so often denied or underestimated, brings us to the point where we must consider, in greater detail, the eremitical branch of the Benedictine family.

One of the most venerable and ancient shoots of the primitive Benedictine stock is the Order of Camaldoli. This Order explicitly takes upon itself the task of providing a refuge for the pure contemplative life, in solitude. Born of the intense revival of monastic fervor that swept Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries, Camaldoli was founded in a high valley of the Apennines, beyond Arezzo, by St. Romuald in 1012. Entirely unique in western monasticism of the present day, the Camaldolese hermitage presents the aspect of an ancient *laura*, a village of detached cells, clustered around the church. Unlike the typical Charterhouse, whose adjoining cells open out on a common cloister, Camaldoli has no cloister and jealously insists on keeping the cells twenty or thirty feet apart. Silence and solitude, essential to the true life of contemplation, are here not a mere question of “spirit” and of “ideal” but also belong to the letter of the rule. For Camaldoli, like the Chartreuse, realizes that a contemplative is not content with “interior silence” and “interior solitude” alone. Interior silence may well be the refuge of the monk engaged in a more or less active life, who seeks God in moments of recollection. But the best way to foster true interior silence is to preserve real exterior silence, and the best way to have interior solitude is not to be alone in a crowd but to be simply and purely alone – far from the sight and sound of other men.

Why this solitude? Because the monastic life in the Church demands an opportunity to reach the fullness of its aspirations. It would be a sad sign of decadence in monastic fervor if perfect silence and true solitude were nothing but a pure fiction, an “idea,” a “spirit,” and no longer a literal reality in any order in the Church. Christian tradition has never doubted that the perfect life of contemplation, in its highest form, demands to be lived in the cell of the hermit. Even in that form of the religious life which is dedicated to sharing with others the fruits of contemplation, the hermitage maintains its claim to be the fountain head of apostolic fervor. No one gives what he does not have, and that is why the Order of Carmel always has its eyes fixed upon the eremitical ideal in which it sees the only justification of its apostolate, and indeed of its very existence. Hence the importance [12] of prayer and solitude in the Carmelite cell, and hence also the gradual revival, in our time, of the ancient Carmelite “Deserts” or hermitages, where the priests retire at least for a time to recapture the true spirit of their model, the prophet Elias.

What must necessarily remain more in the realm of the theoretical and the ideal in other orders is the rule of every day for the hermits of Camaldoli and Monte Corona, as well as for the Carthusians. And again, we repeat that this emphasis on the purely contemplative life is necessary in the Church. The prayer of the Church indeed finds a most perfect public expression in the corporate and liturgical worship solemnly celebrated by the great monastic Orders. The adoration which she offers to God finds its supreme fulfillment in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, without which no other prayer, no sacrifice, no virtue whether solitary or social, would have value in the sight of God. Nevertheless, liturgical worship and other public forms of prayer, together with occasional meditation practiced in common, do not suffice to satisfy the deep need for intimate communion with God which is the mark of the pure contemplative vocation. The fact that this sublime vocation may be rare, the fact

that it appeals to only a few, does not mean that it does not have a vitally important part to play in the prayer-life of the Church. It is well known that Pope Pius XI, in *Umbratilem*, brought out the apostolic fruitfulness of the hidden life of contemplative prayer and asserted that the contemplation of hermits and anchorites had never been more necessary to the Church than in our own day!

The hermit's whole day of silent adoration prolongs his Mass and Eucharistic communion. It keeps him constantly in the most intimate contact with God by a pure faith and a burning charity which cannot be matched in any other form of life. Above all, the hermit lives as it were buried in hope, with his mind [13] and heart orientated out of this world to the Father. Standing at all times on the threshold of eternity, he gazes into the eschatological darkness of the future and fills his lungs with the pure air of the world that is to come. The purity of his faith, hope and love are necessary in the life of the Church's mystical organism, and the rest of us profit greatly by it. For our faith is too often distracted and blinded by the smoke of human reasonings, our hope is clouded with temporal aspirations, our apostolic charity is sometimes tainted with unconscious self-seeking, or ambition, or purely natural zeal.

St. Peter Damian, whom Camaldoli rightly claims as one of her greatest spokesmen, was very much aware of the hermit's place in the unity of the Mystical Christ, and wrote a short tract which reveals the depths of that mystery which we call the Communion of Saints. This booklet is called the *Dominus vobiscum*. Its occasion, as the title shows, was a problem that had arisen among the hermits of St. Peter Damian's time: some of them had inquired whether it was right for a hermit to say "*Dominus vobiscum*" and its response "*Et cum spiritu tuo*," when he was all alone in his oratory reciting the divine office. Instead of saying "The Lord be with you," should he not rather say "The Lord be with *me*?" The Saint's explanation is that the unbroken unity of the Church is not only seen in the totality of her members, but that the entire Church is also mystically present in and with each individual member. By the unity of faith she is single in all her many members and by the bond of charity she is whole in each individual – *in pluribus per fidei unitatem simplex, et in singulis per caritatis glutinum multiplex* (C. 6, PL 145, col. 235).

The saint illustrates this by comparing the unity of Christ in His Mystical Body with His unity in His sacramental Body. Just as on all the altars of the world there is but one Body of [14] Christ, and one chalice of His Most Precious Blood, so the whole Christ is present in each individual member of the Church. It is by virtue of these principles that St. Peter Damian shows how the hermit priest, reciting the office alone in his mountain oratory, can and indeed must say "*Dominus vobiscum*" and answer himself "*Et cum spiritu tuo*." The whole Church is present in the cell where he is alone.

The fact that this mystical integration in the whole Christ is increased by solitude is the theological justification for the eremitical life. And the joy of the hermit in his vocation of pure solitude and renunciation is a river which goes forth, through the secret channels of the communion of saints, to make glad the city of God and strengthen the arms of those who labor and fight for God in the plains below. This heightened sense of unity in Christ is inseparable from the hermit's "Eucharistic" spirit and the fountain head of his thanksgiving. Even though in his solitude he may have moments of terrible darkness and isolation, even though his sense of his own poverty and aloneness before God may grow as the years go on, the hermit never loses his deep sense of supernatural solidarity with the whole Mystical Body of Christ. Why should he? More than the preacher or missionary, who is often bewildered by the details of his work and by the confusion of human trivialities, the hermit may, by the gift of God, come to a deep realization of the fact that he is present by his Mass and Communion in the hearts of men whom he will never see on earth. He will be obscurely reassured

of the fruitfulness of his hidden apostolate which is all the more effective for being uniquely and integrally supernatural – a pure product of theological virtue, and of prayer directed by the Holy Ghost.

One of the peculiar characteristics of Camaldoli is the fact that the Camaldolese hermit may even receive permission to become [15] a recluse. After five years of solemn profession, a hermit who is well qualified and tested may receive permission to live absolutely alone and undisturbed in his cell, never coming out to join the others in the Church or in their common gatherings except three times a year: on St. Martin's Day (in November) and on Quinquagesima Sunday, days of recreation which precede the two monastic Lents, and during the last three days of Holy Week. At all other times, the recluses remain in their cell and their walled garden, say Mass in their own private oratory if they are priests, and never communicate with the other hermits either by the spoken word or by writing, except with special permission. When they hear the bells for the canonical hours, they recite them in their cells, and in addition to the prayers said by the others they also recite fifty psalms, and devote twice as much time to meditation. But on the whole the number of prescribed prayers and practices are not increased, since it is assumed that the recluse, being a mature solitary and capable of responding to the inspirations of divine grace by himself, will abandon himself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in a life of holy freedom, subject of course to the control of a wise director, and in obedience to the Prior.

The singular advantage of reclusion is that it makes possible a pure contemplative life of real solitude and simplicity, without formalism and without inflexible prescriptions of minor detail, yet fully protected by spiritual control and by religious obedience. The hermit and the recluse, being true sons of St. Benedict and living under an authentic interpretation of his Holy Rule, are never exempted in principle from the obedience which keeps them in direct contact with the sanctifying and formative action exercised by Christ through the hierarchy of His Church. Union with the visible representative of Christ only strengthens and protects the inner spiritual action of the Holy Spirit Who carries on His [16] secret work in the soul of the hermit all the more freely because obedience has removed the obstacles to His action. The Prior, on the other hand, himself a hermit and a man of God, knows how to exercise his authority in such a way as to encourage the free response of each soul to its own individual call.

The founders of Camaldoli, and St. Peter Damian, are sometimes taxed with an excessive severity which goes far beyond the limits of Benedictine discretion. It is true that the first hermits of Camaldoli sought to reproduce, in their hidden cells, more than the solitude and contemplation of the Desert Fathers. They were great lovers of austerity, and the energy with which they practiced bodily penance may seem, to us, to have been inordinately violent. It was an energy characteristic of those times. Yet its excessive rigor is not essential to the Camaldolese way of life.

In order to evaluate the true spirit of Camaldoli, we must look not only at the writings of St. Peter Damian or the life of St. Romuald, but also and above all at the Constitutions, written by Blessed Rudolf in 1080, which alone can give a true well-rounded picture of the Camaldolese life and its spirit.

Here we see, first of all, an observance that is austere but not extreme. It is marked, on the contrary, by a spirit of remarkable discretion and breadth of view. In an age which produced many monuments of monastic legislation, this is one of the most admirable documents as well as one of the least known. It certainly merits to rank with the customs of Guigo the Carthusian or the Usages of Cîteaux. Earlier than both of these, it is less strictly juridical in its tone. Many of the chapters are purely ascetic. Others are theological. The effect of the whole is one of balance and sanity and supernatural good sense. It reflects at once the true spirit of the Gospel of Christ, and the wisdom of

the greatest Desert Fathers who, far from being extremists, were [17] remarkable above all for their prudence – in singular contrast to the intemperate zeal of their lesser contemporaries.

The Constitutions of Bl. Rudolf provide not only for the hermitage of Camaldoli, but also for a monastery of cenobites, which is to be nearby and to act as a point of contact with the outside world. The Camaldolese still preserve this combination of cenobitical and eremitical communities. The Monastery of cenobites receives and trains novices for the hermitage. It takes care of guests, it feeds the poor. It supplies food and other needs for the hermitage, and it receives the hermits when they are sick and need medical care. It must not be thought, however, that the Camaldolese have a divided vocation, a life in which one may be either a hermit or a cenobite by choice. The monastery of cenobites serves a useful purpose and there must of necessity be some monks there to keep it going and do the work that it involves. But at Camaldoli one is only a cenobite by accidental necessity, and a hermit by choice.

The hermitage has all the major advantages of the common life. Above all, it is built on a solid juridical foundation which protects the hermit against the instability of human nature, providing him with guidance and support, without interfering with the freedom of spirit without which the truly contemplative life could not possibly develop. At the same time, the framework of customs and of monastic obedience remains nothing more than a framework. Within this frame, the hermit himself must take his life in hand, and manfully accomplish in silence and in solitude the work which God has destined for him. This cannot possibly be done without great energy, persevering courage, profound faith, and real spiritual maturity. When St. Benedict called cenobitism the “strongest” division of the monastic family, he meant that cenobitism was strongest as an *institution* and that its members could find a peculiar strength and support in the presence and [18] life of their community. Ideally speaking, the eremitical life is not an “institution.” It is a private life lived alone with God, under the light and the guidance of God alone. Camaldoli, true to the spirit of St. Benedict, makes this extraordinary ideal more accessible by giving at least the essentials of an institutional set-up. But in the last analysis the strength of the hermit is not to be sought in any rule or any obedience or any guidance imposed on him from the outside. He has to be one of those rare men who is strong with an inner spiritual consistency that is all his own and which enables him to function in solitude, without the stimulus of example or the fear of criticism. It is not simple for a man to live constantly on a high level of integrity when he is seen by no one except God. It requires both great faith and an unusual strength of character.

The Camaldolese hermit can count on this interior strength, however, for he belongs to the great Benedictine family, and is formed by the spirit and the living tradition of the greatest of monks. Hence his life is simple and strong, and it has deep roots in the wisdom of the Church. One even feels that the primitive austerity of Camaldolese solitude would greatly appeal to St. Benedict if he were alive today. It is probably not exaggerated to say that the Father of western monks would feel himself more at home in the simple mountain hermitage than in many a greater monastery amid the cities of the plain.

In all religious life, the spirit is vastly more important than the letter. But the more solitary a life becomes, the more important is its spirit and the less important the letter of the rule. The eremitical life is almost exclusively spirit. That is why the letter of its legislation is generally extremely simple. The early customs of Camaldoli, to which we have already referred, are no exception. That is why they are extremely adaptable to all places (provided [19] they be solitary places) and to all times. The accidentals appear clearly for what they are, and one easily sees that nothing essential to the

life is lost, for instance, by a diminution of the great quantity of vocal prayers that were said in the early days, a mitigation of the extreme fasting, and a discreet moderation of the frequent scourging that was practiced in the eleventh century.

The main purpose of the Camaldolese life is union with God by solitary prayer in the silence of the cell. Everything is directed to this end. All that the hermit does should promote that *puritas cordis* (purity of heart) which makes contemplative union possible. Two great means to this end are silence and meditation. Both, says Bl. Rudolf, are vitally important. Neither one is of any avail without the other. “Silence without meditation is death – it is like a man buried alive. But meditation without silence is pure frustration – it is like a man buried alive struggling in his sepulchre. But both silence and meditation together bring great rest to the soul and lead it to perfect contemplation” (*Constitutiones*, c. 45).

The silence that is required for this interior meditation is first of all a silence of the tongue, then silence of the body, finally silence of the heart. The tongue renounces useless and evil speaking. The body is silent when it abandons useless and harmful actions. The heart is silent when it is purified from useless and evil thoughts. What would be the use of keeping silence with your tongue, if you have tumult of vices raising a storm in your actions and in your mind? The purpose of this silence is not merely negative. It has a positive and constructive force in the life of prayer. It is indeed one of the best and most efficacious of ascetic weapons because it is one of the most positive. Silence builds the life of prayer which, like the Temple of Solomon, is an edifice which must grow without the noise of human labor [20] and instruments. “The house of God grows in sacred silence, and a temple that will never fall is constructed without noise.” And the Legislator goes on: “If you are quiet and humble, you will not fear what your flesh may do to you. For where the Heavenly Dweller rests in peace, the betrayer cannot prevail.” It is in the silent soul that wisdom takes up her abode, and remains forever. *In silenti, et quiescenti vel meditantia anima permanet sapientia* (*Constitutiones*, c. 44).

Just as St. Anthony of the Desert placed discretion at the top of his list of virtues, as being the mother of them all, so too the Camaldolese hermit will learn to live in a spirit of sobriety and moderation. The *sobrietas* we here consider is too big to be fitted into the narrow limits of a scholastic category. It transcends the bounds of temperance and includes prudence and justice and fortitude. Like Benedictine humility, it is really an integrated organism of good habits which governs and orders all our actions, referring them all to their proper end. The sobriety of the Camaldolese hermit therefore not only moderates his bodily appetites, but restrains the appetites of his soul and leads him in all things along a path of simplicity and wisdom. In fact, sobriety not only curbs gluttony, but also restrains the inordinate zeal for fasting. It not only teaches him to keep silence, but teaches him to speak at the right time. It not only spurs him on to courageous vigils and night prayers, but also tempers his zeal for penance and tells him when he ought to sleep. In succinct words, sobriety is a virtue by which we “curb the passions of the flesh, but do not destroy our nature.” “For we must kill the carnal desires when they fight against our soul, but we must not destroy the sense organs which are useful to the soul. But living soberly, and piously, and justly in this world, we will, by sobriety, look after ourselves, and by justice we [21] will come to the help of our neighbor, and by piety we will serve God” (*Constitutiones*, c. 41).

This mention of care for one’s neighbor reminds us that fraternal charity is by no means excluded from the eremitical life. It cannot be, and St. Basil’s accusation that the hermit has no opportunity to practice this all-important virtue is not altogether exact. The hermit has always recognized his obligation towards his neighbor – which is not only an obligation to pray for others, but also to perform corporal and spiritual works of mercy at certain times.

This brings us back to the existence of the *coenobium*, the monastery traditionally attached to the hermitage. Chapter 38 of the *Constitutiones* considers it reasonable that each hermit should desire to take his turn in the active life of serving the poor and the sick and entertaining guests. Here too sobriety is in command. It would be wrong for him to desire too much activity, but it would also be wrong for him not to desire any activity at all. On the contrary, a certain amount of moderate activity will make his solitary life more fruitful and enable him to return to his prayer with a relaxed mind and a renewed enthusiasm for the interior life.

The exterior activity of charity of which we speak here is directed to men from the world outside and is of course quite different from the ordinary manual or intellectual labor which the hermit daily performs in his own cell. It is also different from the normal amount of service which the hermit performs when he takes his part in the simplified routine of communal life and prayer that still exists in the hermitage-community. It is clear, then, that the Camaldolese hermit does not live in absolute isolation and that he does have plentiful opportunities for the exercise of charity, without ever being overwhelmed with exterior duties and activities.

[22] The Constitutions stress the fact that human feeling, supernaturalized by a spirit of mercy and compassion, is most necessary for hermits: *Pietas solitariis valde necessaria est* (*Constitutiones*, c. 42). They must be kind, meek, gentle, humane. The reason for the emphasis placed on this virtue is, of course, that the professional hazard of solitude is precisely a growing insensibility to human values. This is by all means to be considered a hazard, not as a virtue. It is not recommended that the solitary become merely “tough.” On the contrary, if his heart becomes hardened, he will find the road to sanctity barred before him. The narrow gate is not opened to men without human sympathy, and incapable of supernatural affection.

Pietas (says our author) is a kind disposition of heart which, with merciful tenderness, is patient and sympathizes with the weaknesses of other men. For solitaries often show themselves unduly austere and unkind to others under the pretext of eremitical severity, as though they themselves were not like everyone else.

The training ground in which this is practiced and acquired is, once again, the rudimentary community life that still exists among the hermits of Camaldoli. Kindness is not learned without contact with human weakness, and even in the hermitage it is obligatory, above all, to practice that charity which is the fulfillment of the whole Law. There is no Christian perfection without the tender sympathy and patience which the Savior of the world Himself showed towards the weak, the un-gifted, the un-loved and the unfortunate sinner.

Nevertheless, though these virtues have to be stressed in the life of the solitary because they are inseparable from the very vocation of a Christian, they are not the peculiar essence of his [23] vocation. The special call of the hermit is always to solitude and contemplation, and by far the greater part of his time is spent in the cell where he has no opportunity to practice these other works of virtue. Patience and stability in the silence of his cell are the most important and most fundamental of his specific virtues, along with the silence and meditation without which his cell would be nothing but a tomb. Indeed, when a solitary loses the true spirit of his vocation, his cell is no longer able to contain him. It casts him out, as the sea casts up a dead body on the shore (*Constitutiones*, c. 37).

Hence the importance of constant and fruitful occupation. This occupation should be, by preference, interior and spiritual, and should not require a great amount of moving around. Time is spent of course in house-cleaning and gardening, for each cell has a somewhat large garden enclosed within its wall, and the *Constitutiones* speak of the hermits going out into the forest to cut

and gather firewood. At the present day the hermits of Camaldoli also gather herbs and resins in the forest in order to distil a liqueur, the sale of which contributes to their support. There may also be a certain amount of snow shoveling in winter. The chief occupations of the solitary in his cell, besides meditative prayer, are reading, study, recitation of the Psalms, and other simple occupations which are not incompatible with the solitary life such as writing or drawing, the making of rosaries or the exercise of some craft. The more spiritual occupations are preferred because they do not disturb the “tranquillity of the hermitage” with undue agitation, but on the whole some latitude is allowed, and the spirit of the Camaldolese life is supple and flexible, so as not to paralyze the action of the Spirit or to crush human weakness by a too rigid confinement.

[24] When this spirit is acquired and fully lived, it begets a joy that has no comparison anywhere on earth. “To the quiet and persevering hermit, his sojourn in the cell brings a refreshing sweetness and a blessed silence which seem to be a taste of paradise” (*Constitutiones*, c. 36).

* * *

The world of men has forgotten the joys of silence, and the peace of solitude which are necessary, in some measure, for the fullness of human living. Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally. When that inner voice is not heard, when man cannot attain to the spiritual peace that comes from being perfectly at one with his own true self, his life is always miserable and exhausting. For he cannot go on happily for long unless he is in contact with the springs of spiritual life which are hidden in the depths of his own soul. If man is constantly exiled from his own home, locked out of his own spiritual solitude, he ceases to be a true person. He no longer lives as a man. He is not even a healthy animal. He becomes a kind of automaton, functioning without joy because he has lost all spontaneity. He is no longer moved from within, but only from outside himself. He no longer makes decisions for himself, he lets them be made for him. He no longer acts upon the outside world, but lets it act upon him. He is propelled through life by a series of collisions with outside forces. His is no longer the life of a human being, but the existence of a sentient billiard ball, a being without purpose and without any deeply valid response to reality.

[25] The serene beauty of the monastic ideal, and particularly the austere joy of contemplative solitude, are often pointed to as a condemning contrast to the world of sin. And this is true. The humility of the monk is indeed a reproach to the insolent self-sufficiency of modern man, whether he be a totalitarian or a capitalist. The poverty and self-denial of the monk, his meekness, his obedience, his solitude, condemn the insatiable greed, the pitiful lack of self-control, the craven dependence of man who is left at the mercy of modern society.

But in proposing to the world the sanctity of the monastic life as an example, the Church does not merely seek to humiliate and reproach its sinfulness. She is a kind mother. Her authority aims to develop men to help them grow and seek happiness. She does not merely want to punish them or deprive them of the last ounces of vitality and joy which they still retain in their souls. The monastic life is therefore always to be seen as a witness to the purity and fruitfulness of the life of the Church. It is in this sense above all that monasticism will always manifest the Church’s inexhaustible reservoirs of sanctity. For sanctity and life are one: holiness is the special value of the life that comes to man’s soul direct from God. Holiness is life lived in its fullness, in union with

the Living God. It brings to perfection all the deepest resources of man's nature, and elevates him to the perfection of supernatural life and mystical union.

The Desert Fathers knew this well. One of them, Abbot Isaias, expounds the traditional doctrine of the Fathers: that man, made in the image of God, was made for perfect union with Him. Having lost the capacity for union by Adam's sin, he had recovered it in Christ. Through Christ man returns to the original perfection intended for human nature by God. The Christian life is therefore a return to "paradise," a restoration of [26] the joy and peace of Adam's contemplative life in Eden. In restoring man, the Incarnation of Christ has also restored his body and all its faculties together with those of his Soul and indeed the sanctifying power of the Cross has poured itself out upon the whole world, and man is once again able to find God in himself and in everything else. This Patristic doctrine is the basis for all we have seen in our consideration of the monastic way of life. Here is what Abbot Isaias says:

I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that when God made man in the beginning He placed him in paradise with all the faculties of his soul in perfect order and according to this nature. But after man had listened to the deceiver, all his faculties were turned against his nature, and he was cast down from his proper dignity.

But Our Lord, driven by His great charity, declared His mercy to mankind. The Word was made flesh, that is to say He was made a perfect man, like unto us in all things except sin, in order that by His holy Body He might call us back to the original perfection of our nature. For showing man His mercy He led man back into paradise. . . .

He has given us a holy way of serving God and a pure law, that man might be brought back into that state of nature in which he was created by God.

(Oratio II, *De Mente secundum naturam*)

This "return to paradise," this recovery of the perfect charity in which man was created by God, is the true end of the monastic life. In all the great Rules, and all the traditional documents of the great monks of the past, this return is seen above all as an ascent to divine contemplation. Just as Moses in the solitude of Mount Horeb led his flocks into the inner parts [27] of the desert, and there saw the burning bush, and heard the Voice that spoke, and learned, from the Voice, the unutterable and Holy Name of God, so too the monk penetrates into the wilderness of silence and perfect solitude to find God. There he discovers the "burning bush" which is his own spirit, enkindled with the fire of God but not consumed. In order to contemplate this tremendous mystery he must imitate Moses and remove his "shoes" – that is to say he must put away all human and natural conceptions of God: for the God he is approaching is not a mere "object" able to be contained within the limits of a concept. He is the Living God, burning like an intangible flame within the substance of our own spirit that derives all its life from Him. He is not experienced except by the soul that burns with the divine fire. The Flame of God is the Flame of pure life, infinite Being, Absolute Reality. Only those know Him who have themselves abandoned all falsity and all illusion and all pretense and all that is not real. More than that, they must abandon themselves, they must ascend above themselves, they must go beyond themselves. And in rising beyond themselves, they become most perfectly themselves, no longer in themselves but in Him.

The voice they then hear is no longer the voice of a philosophical intuition, no longer the echo of the words of divine revelation, but the very substance of Reality itself – Reality not as a concept, but as a Person. "*I am Who am.*"

And thou, whoever thou art, who livest in solitude, and ledest a solitary life having led thy flocks, that is to say thy simple thoughts and thy humble affections, into the depths of thy loving will, there thou wilt find the bush of thy humility, which heretofore brought forth nothing but thorns and briars, radiant with the light of God. For thou [28] wilt be glorifying and bearing God in thy own body. This is the divine fire which enlightens us without burning us, gives radiance but does not consume us. . . . And the bush that burns without being consumed is human nature enkindled with the fire of divine love, and unharmed by the slightest touch of destruction. (*Constitutiones*, c. 11)

Appendix I: Textual Variants

	<i>The Silent Life</i>		<i>The Camaldolese Way</i>
144	2. <i>The Camaldolese</i>	9	<i>omitted*</i>
145	(Matt. 10:34) It is the peace to some extent, has become independent of by concentrating The monastic spirit is above all a spirit of solitude, of separation from the world. The hermit is by nature example of poverty		<i>omitted*</i> And detachment . . . is the peace has liberated . . . ascetic combat, from and concentrated <i>omitted*</i>
	Consequently, every monk the aspiration this disposition is to solitude, to self-renunciation. follow his example	10	The monk is by nature example of obscure poverty But the monk an aspiration this is* solitude obscurity and self-renunciation. follow his own example
146	In writing . . . asceticism).		<i>omitted*</i>
146-47	whose cells are all next to one another and	11	whose adjoining
148	Camaldoli jealously		Camaldoli has no cloister and jealously on keeping . . . thirty feet apart.
148-49	on the fact . . . in the Church.		that a contemplative . . . “interior solitude” alone.
149	that “interior solitude” do . . . contemplative life. foster interior preserve exterior purely alone.		foster true interior preserve real exterior purely alone . . . sound of other men.
149-50	The purpose . . . in Christ.	11-13	Why this solitude? . . . natural zeal.*
150	great spokesmen and witnesses, profoundly aware	13	greatest spokesmen, very much aware
150-51	Christ. Indeed, . . . whole Church.		Christ, . . . col. 235).*
152	Christ is also the source of Unlike the Apostle, and blinded . . . all times, prayers and by his charity	14	Christ is inseparable from More than the preacher or missionary, by the details of . . . human trivialities, Mass and Communion,
153	remain in the cell recite them in such a life makes it possible for a without rigid, inflexible	15	remain in their cell* recite in* reclusion makes possible a without inflexible representatives*
154	representative desert fathers.	16	Desert Fathers* Rudolf, in 1080, which
155	Rudolf, which		

	Consuetudines		customs
	Blessed Rudolf provide	17	Bl. Rudolf provide
156	The solitary . . . hermitage.		<i>omitted</i>
	The hermitage, at the same time, has		The hermitage has
	founded on a solid		built on a solid*
157	is in no sense an institution.	18	is not an "institution."
	a life lived		a private life lived
158	greater and more splendid monastery		greater monastery
159	the almost continual	19	the frequent
	<i>puritas cordis</i> which		<i>puritas cordis</i> (purity of heart) which
	The two great		Two great
	"For silence		"Silence
	death, it		death – it
	like the struggling of the man buried		like a man buried
	alive, in his sepulchre.		alive struggling in his sepulchre.
	c. 44.		c. 45)**
	tongue, a silence		tongue, then silence
	body, a silence		body, finally silence
	For what		What
160	sound of any iron tool.	19-20	noise of human labor and instruments.
	noises." And	20	noise." And
	up her abode.		up abode.**
	44.		c. 44).
	It overflows		It transcends
161	actions in reference to		actions, referring them all to
	teaches us to keep		teaches him to keep
	teaches us to speak		teaches him to speak
	spurs us on		spurs him on
	tempers our zeal		tempers his zeal
	tells us when we ought		tells him when he ought
	provide for ourselves,		look after ourselves,
	41.	21	c. 41).
162	entertaining the guests.		entertaining guests.
	to his prayer		to this prayer*
	directed to guests		directed to men
163	<i>Constitutiones</i>	22	Constitutions
	42.		c. 42).
	the road to sanctity will be barred		he will find the road to sanctity barred
164	without sharing in the tender		without the tender
	world showed		world Himself showed
	36.	23	c. 37)**
165	<i>Constitutiones</i> speak		Constitutions speak
	support. The chief		support. . . . in winter. The chief
	it brings a joy	24	it begets a joy
166	36.		c. 36).
	Of all . . . fruitful apostolate.		<i>omitted*</i>
167	silence, the peace		silence, and the peace
	which is necessary, to some extent,		which are necessary, in some measure,
	living without joy		functioning without joy
	serene and sober beauty	25	serene beauty
	austere simplicity and joy		austere joy
168	reproach sinners.		reproach its sinfulness.
	In fact, that is never her attitude.		<i>omitted*</i>
	seeks to develop		aims to develop
	happiness, not merely to		happiness. She does not merely want to

	and reprove them and take away even the always a joy and vitality Life brings before elevating supernatural and a partial restoration		or deprive them of the always to be seen as a purity It brings and elevates supernatural life and a restoration*
169	In saving man, the passion healed his body faculties, and	26	In restoring men, the Incarnation restored his body faculties together with those of his Soul this recovery of the perfect charity
170	this return to the perfection of charity And in all seen as perfect solitude. rise above all conceptions is a mere His Flame.	27	In all seen above all as perfect solitude to find God. put away all . . . natural conceptions* is not a mere* the divine fire.
171	all sham. they have abandoned they have ascended they are beyond they have become Person. <i>B. Rudolfi Constitutiones</i> , c. 1.	28	all that is not real. they must abandon they must ascend they must go beyond they then hear Person. " <i>I am Who am.</i> " (<i>Constitutiones</i> , c. 11)**

* corresponds to typed text, not handwritten addition

** corresponds neither to typed text nor to handwritten addition

Appendix II: Emendations based on Merton's typescript

<i>Typescript</i>		<i>The Camaldolese Way</i>
In writing . . . asceticism.)		<i>omitted</i>
No one gives	11	Non one gives
recite them in	15	recite in
number of		number af
by Christ		by Crist
representative		representatives
Guigo	16	Guido
prudence – in	17	prudence in
interfering with the		interfering the
up her abode.	20	up abode.
to this prayer	21	to his prayer
without ever being		without being
dead body	23	bead body
36.		37.
<i>Constitutiones</i> speak		Constitutions speak
condemning	25	condamning
obedience,		obecience
resources		resourceses
charity, declared His mercy	26	charity, declared his great charity, declared His mercy