



SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

The first language of God is silence

SILENCE: A FRUIT THE TONGUE CANNOT DESCRIBE

Many are avidly seeking but they alone find who remains in continual silence. Every man who delights in a multitude of words, even though he says admirable things, is empty within.

If you love truth be a lover of silence. Silence like the sunlight will illuminate you in God and deliver you from the phantoms of ignorance. Silence will unite you with God Himself. More than all things love silence, it brings you a fruit that tongue cannot describe.

In the beginning we have to force ourselves to be silent and then there is born something which draws us to silence. May God give you an experience of this something which is born of silence.

If only you will practice this, untold light will dawn upon you as a consequence. After a while a certain sweetness is born in the heart of this exercise and the body is drawn almost by force to remain in silence.

Saint Isaac of Syria

THE PASSIONIST CONSTITUTIONS

AN INWARD AND OUTWARD SILENCE

As a man of great prayer, Paul of the Cross inculcated its importance most forcefully by word and example.

He wished his followers to pray without ceasing and desired our communities to become real schools of prayer, leading to a deep experience of God.

From him we learn the value and practice of an inward and outward silence that gives depth to our lives. This silence fosters the inner peace and calm necessary for the spirit of prayer to grow; it frees us from harassing cares, and hushes the clamour of the demands made upon us daily. (No. 37)



Le Silence, painted plaster sculpture by Auguste Preault (1842-1843)

SOLITUDE

Christ often chose solitude for himself, and counseled his disciples to do likewise. Even today, solitude retains its value for Passionist life.

Aspiring to be men of prayer and teachers of prayer, we must exert ourselves to provide an environment of solitude for our lives. Withdrawing to some degree from the world, we can draw closer to the Father, understand his saving plan, and appraise more objectively secular trends and standards. With this in mind, therefore, the period of annual Retreat is to be faithfully observed. (No. 54)

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass - grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls. | Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Do not speak unless you can improve the silence | Proverb

Silence is a source of great strength | Lao Tzu

He who does not know how to be silent will not know how to speak | Ausonius

Silence is more musical than any song | Christina Rossetti (1830 - 1894)

My personal hobbies are reading, listening to music, and silence | Edith Sitwell (1887 - 1964)

There is no need to go to India or anywhere else to find peace. You will find that deep place of silence right in your room, your garden or even your bathtub | Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

I believe in the discipline of silence and could talk for hours about it | George Bernard Shaw

The rest is silence | William Shakespeare



ST. PAUL OF THE CROSS AND SILENCE

Be a friend of solitude and silence (37)

Recollect yourself in God in holy silence (67)

Love silence, internal and external solitude in choir and in your room

Be a friend of silence (79)

Remain in silence as much as you can (120)

Preserve silence, which is the key of gold that locks up the great treasure of the other virtues which God has placed in us (209)

Love silence and distance from all (230)

Remain in silence and within yourself cry out to God to help you (1410)

I will wait in silence and hope (1547)

Be in a holy silence as much as you can. "The silence which the clay shows the potter, show that to your Maker." (1578)

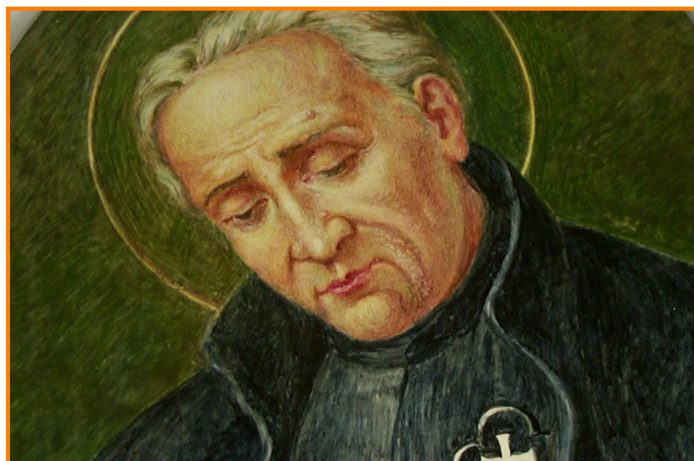
One who knows how to suffer in silence and peace is most perfect (1582)

Remain in silence. (1771)

Be a great lover of prayer, silence and your cell. (1808)

It is good to sit in silence waiting for God. (1965)

Be a lover of silence. (2032)



WHAT SILENCE IS NOT

We need to be clear what silence is not. In the first place, silence is not just an absence of speech or sound or noise, any more than peace is merely an absence of conflict. Silence has its own being, its own reality, its own richness, its own presence, and its own nurturing power. True silence is an affirmation, not a negation, and is the precondition, as noted earlier, of true reverence for speech. Just as there is “a time to speak,” there is also “a time to be silent” (Ecclesiastices 3:7).

Second, true silence is not to be confused with its counterfeits, its deformations. Most have known at some time or another the destructive silence of someone’s bitter refusal to communicate – the so called “silent treatment”. Further, we have known, by either observation or experience, the silence that simply cuts another off in disdain, rejection. And we have experienced silence that is merely empty, nervous, useless.

Third, silence is not an end in itself. Exterior silence is for interior quiet, and both aspects of silence are for the world, all dimensions of the word. The word – whether it be the divine Word, human words, the word of the indwelling Spirit in our own hearts, or “the word” in the communication of arts or the created word – the word has its origin in silence. It can only be heard in silence, and if it is to be effective and fruitful, it must rest in that receptive silence and be nurtured to maturity there.

What, then, is real silence? It is a positive receptivity, a creative waiting, a welcoming openness. It is openness to God, to our deepest selves, to others, both as individual persons and as the human community, to beauty and truth and goodness, to mystery – and to the word of Scripture that reveals God, to the Word who is God’s son. The word that brought the created world into being was spoken out of the creative silence of God. Scripture is full of the call to “Hear the word of the Lord!” And the daily prayer of Jews today, the Shema, begins with that ringing call from Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel”.

If we are to hear, truly and deeply, we must be silent enough to really listen. “But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother: my soul is like a weaned child that is with me” (Psalm 131:2). “In returning and rest you will be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15).

(Silence, Solitude, Simplicity – A Hermit’s Love Affair with a Noisy, Crowded and Complicated World by Sister Jenny Hall OSB, p. 72-73)

QUOTATIONS ON SOLITUDE

I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers | Henry David Thoreau, "Solitude," Walden, 1854

We live in a very tense society. We are pulled apart... and we all need to learn how to pull ourselves together.... I think that at least part of the answer lies in solitude | Helen Hayes

Never be afraid to sit awhile and think | Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun

Inside myself is a place where I live all alone, and that's where I renew my springs that never dry up | Pearl Buck

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul | John Muir

Solitude is painful when one is young, but delightful when one is more mature | Albert Einstein

Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god | Francis Bacon, Sr.

Solitude is fine, but you need someone to tell you that solitude is fine | Honore de Balzac

Language... has created the word "loneliness" to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word "solitude" to express the glory of being alone | Paul Tillich

WHAT SOLITUDE IS NOT

As the real desert is a place of silence, so is it a place of solitude. As the silence repels and frightens some people, the solitude of vast spaces uninhabited by other human beings may well be repellent or fearsome to many. As we may be tempted to fill silence with sound as an escape from depths in ourselves and from the demands of a deepened relation with God and with others, so we may “people” our aloneness with crowds and chatter and diversions of all sorts to avoid genuine solitude. Or in an age that has been very “groupy” as well as “wordy”, we may reject the very idea of solitude because it has been misrepresented to us, or for some other reason we misjudge it.

As with silence, it is necessary to say what solitude is not. In the first place, solitude is not antisocial. The person who embraces true solitude, either at certain times or as a way of life, is not running away from, not rejecting anyone. Rather, such a person is making room within, is preparing to welcome someone – God, others, self. It is a positive choice, appropriate to a social being, and it is for a positive goal.

Nor is true solitude isolationist, seeking to cut off relationships and influence on others, insulating oneself from the human condition of others human beings. Rather, as a multitude of examples can demonstrate, genuine solitude leads one into compassion at a deeper level.

Further, genuine solitude is not mere privacy, an elimination of intrusions so I can do my own thing. Solitude may suffer many invasions without being violated, and it is for much greater ends than my “own thing”.

And true solitude is not individualistic, egocentric, seeking to assert one’s own self over against others, claiming any sort of superiority. It is not about expanding the ego but about losing it in the deeper self, the true self, and thus, again, nurturing the capacity for communion with others.

(Silence, Solitude, Simplicity – A Hermit’s Love Affair with a Noisy, Crowded and Complicated World by Sister Jenny Hall OSB, p. 86)

THE ACTIVIST DISEASE OF EXHAUSTION

In an age when there is a multitude of ministries in the church for laity, clergy and members of religious communities, and when there are hectic activity and endless demands, there is a great deal of burnout. Henri Nouwen is one of the best known spiritual teachers of contemporary ministers. In books like *Reaching Out*, *Out of Solitude*, and *The Way of the Heart*, he speaks of the need for regular times of solitude for effective ministry, and for the avoidance of the activist disease of exhaustion. "The goal of our life is not people. It is God. Only in God shall we find the rest we seek. It is therefore to solitude that we must return, not alone, but with all those whom we embrace through our ministry".

Many women will be familiar with Anne Morrow Lindbergh's little book, *Gift from the Sea*. It is not written in an explicitly Christian context, but surely is in harmony with the Christian call to time spent in genuine solitude. By the time of its twentieth-anniversary edition in 1970 it had reached many and still continues to do so. Disagreeing with John Donne's "No Man is an Island", which we sang lustily for many years, she wrote from her island solitude that we are all islands – but islands in a common sea and for truth's sake we must recognise this.

Is not the fundamental reason for our needing this solitude the fact that we are, each of us, inescapably solitaries? Is each of us not a unique being, a one-of-a-kind image of the infinite God? Does not each of us have the experience of an incommunicable depth, an awareness that, however much we might want to do so, in pain and in longing, we cannot wholly open our inmost being to another? The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke speaks of "the love that consists in this: that two solitudes protect and border and greet each other". If I will not accept my own solitude, how can I accept what I cannot escape, the solitude of my death? No matter how many loved ones are with me, humanly speaking I die alone.

And yet we are social beings. If we would live our lives truly, we are stretched, extended, called to more life by responding to both aspects of our personal mystery. The temptation in recent times has been to all but submerge the solitary in the social. Perhaps we are on the way to honouring and nurturing the life-giving integration of both aspects of our human mystery. Then indeed we would have hoped of a deepened relation with God, with our own true selves, with others, and with creation.

(Silence, Solitude, Simplicity – A Hermit's Love Affair with a Noisy, Crowded and Complicated World by Sister Jenny Hall OSB, p. 89)

GOD SPEAKS IN SOLITUDE

Scripture is a long story of God's speaking to persons in their solitude.

Abraham receives the promise under the night sky and experiences the sealing of the covenant alone as darkness is falling (Genesis 15)

Moses is shepherding alone in the desert when he receives the self revelation of the Lord and his own commission where the bush burns unconsumed (Exodus 3).

Then Moses ascends Mount Sinai alone for further revelation and received the commandments (Exodus 19-20; 33-34).

In an account reminiscent of the burning bush and the commissioning of Moses, Joshua has a revelatory encounter before the capture of Jericho (Joshua 5).

Samuel is addressed at night alone in the sanctuary (1 Samuel 3).

The word of the Lord seems to have come to each of the prophets in solitude Nathan (2 Samuel 7), Elijah (1 Kings 19), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1).

Ezekiel was in a group of exiles when he was called, but he alone saw the vision (Ezekiel 1).

Similarly, God speaks to New Testament figures in solitude.

Four times in the first two chapters of Matthew, God communicates with Joseph in dreams, and the Magi are counseled in a dream.

At the outset of Luke's Gospel, when Zechariah is alone in the sanctuary, the angel of the Lord speaks to him about the coming birth of a son, John (Luke 1).

Similarly, Mary is in apparent solitude when the angel Gabriel announces to her the birth of a son, Jesus (Luke 1).

Some years later, "the word of the Lord came to John in the desert" (Luke 3).

And still later in the New Testament, Peter and Paul and Philip receive the Lord's message in their solitude (Acts 10; 1 Corinthians 12; Acts 8).

THE FRUIT OF SOLITUDE

What of the impact of solitude on the self? Some people might be tempted to sum it up in one word “selfish”. But anyone who has spent considerable time in the real life of solitude knows otherwise. If what one seeks is self-satisfaction the last place to go is the hermitage, and that must surely be proportionately true of those who seek temporary and periodic solitude out of a deep human need.

As was true when we spoke of silence, the question is this “Which self?” Do I mean the self that is created by societal expectations, worldly ambitions, the clichés and fashions of my culture, the “in thing” and the masks I put on to be accepted and, as we say, “with it”?

Is that really who I am – the superficial self, the self formed mindlessly by current and therefore very transient compulsions to be relevant, important? There is no place for those selves in the hermitage; there is nothing to nourish them and I find them antithetical to my very being. They get stripped away when solitude does its work, when they are not constantly fed and manipulated by shallow social contacts.

In the process of letting solitude do that work I come, as I did with silence, to an identity not mindlessly projected on me and mindlessly accepted, but a deeper, inward self where I follow no crowd but start to become an authentic centre of being, a living out of the mystery of human personhood. And I find out in the process, if I haven’t learned it before, that I am not self-sufficient; that refusing to let the ephemeral and compulsive dictates run my life, I have not the power to run my own life. I find myself empty, needy, full of desire for the good and holy, and incapable of coming to it on my own. Then, with God’s grace, I come to the indwelling God with all my emptiness, my desire, my need, my dependence. Thus I begin to be in communion with my true self and make the beginnings of living a really human, inner-directed Christian life.

This way is a desert – anyone who has lived in it can tell you it is so.

SOLITUDE AND SERVICE

Every Christian solitary, whether living in a hermitage for a long time or going to a quiet place now and again for some desert time, has to discern, with prayer, in grace, and often with the help of another, the right balance between solitude and service.

Often Jesus simply left the crowds; at other times he left his solitude precisely because of the needs of others. It is apparently an ongoing tension, never finally resolved in this life. But one thing can be said for certain. Persons seeking to be truly solitary are profoundly sensitive to others’ needs – this out of their own scarred heart, and out of constantly renewed awareness of God’s compassion in Jesus.

Just how open the true solitary is to others is illuminated by a story from the fourth and fifth century Desert Fathers and Mothers, among the most rigorous solitaires in Christian history. One tells of a brother who came to a certain solitary to ask his help. When he was leaving he asked forgiveness for making the old man break his rule of solitude and silence. And the old man answered, "My rule is to receive thee with hospitality and send thee away in peace."

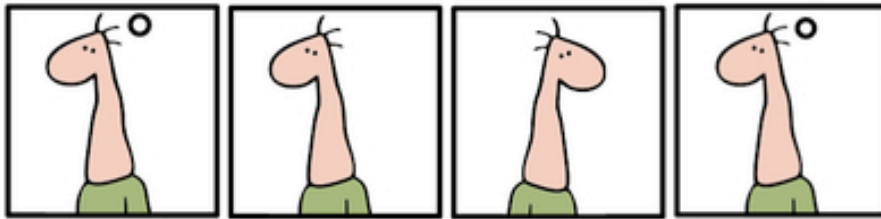
CHOOSE SOLITUDE

"Solitude can be an emotional lifesaver. I know that is the case for me and, given a choice between an eternity in which no solitude was possible and an eternity in which solitude only was available, I would be very hard put not to choose solitude: the chance to get back into myself to renew myself; the chance to check out what I am feeling and thinking; the chance to drift and dream and think at my own pace; the chance to cease to be attentive to the needs, demands and simply the presence of other people. It is in times of solitude that I feel restored to myself. I really could not do without it."

Stephanie Dowrick, Intimacy and Solitude, William Heinemann Australia, 1971.

WHAT A BUSY
WORLD!
IN THE NEXT 5
MINUTES I WILL
DO NOTHING

MAYBE I
SHOULD
TWITTER
ABOUT IT



geek and poke

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

SOLITUDE, SILENCE AND ENCLOSURE

The material aspect of solitude demanded that houses be built “away from the noise of the world” and at a distance “of two or three miles” from the towns. All foundations made by St. Paul of the Cross were at that distance or greater, the only exception being the Roman foundation. This, however, though within the walls of the old city, enjoyed at that time sufficient solitude because the city dwellings began in Piazza Venezia, and the Celian Hill was a rural area with very few houses. Paul admitted a certain flexibility in this matter, as we gather from the instructions he gave a religious sent to verify the possibility of a Neapolitan foundation. If the desirable solitary site could not be found, another within the city limits could be accepted “provided it be in a place well apart from the turmoil of the city”. The reason for this flexibility was his expectation that the Lord would be greatly glorified by the establishment of the Congregation for the neighbours’ spiritual benefit.

Solitude for St. Paul of the Cross meant not only founding the house in an uninhabited place but also having a convenient amount of land reserved for the religious with the purpose of protecting the atmosphere of silence and the liberty of movement in solitary or common walks without being subjected to the disturbance of the curious. At the same time the land served the purpose of providing the community with a vegetable garden, orchard and firewood. The basic motive was the liberty of the religious. Hence he opposed family dwellings close to the retreat, especially if from them the interior of the garden and the rooms could be seen.

History of the Passionists, Volume 1 by Fabiano Giorgini C.P.



THE HURRY SICKNESS OF OUR TIMES

One of the most important of the healing qualities of solitude is the opportunity to slow down, to step away, if only momentarily, from what author James Gleick calls the “hurry sickness” of our times.

(James Gleick, Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything (New York: Pantheon, 1999, p. 277)

I HAVE NO TIME

Shortly before I left for Maine, I had read a passage in a recently published book that cut uncomfortably close to the circumstances of my own life as a priest. It was an account of a conversation over dinner between two busy professional friends, one a well known doctor who had introduced revolutionary patient-care procedures at his prestigious medical centre.

When I remarked about the success of his work and asked about its future, his dark eyes suddenly well up with tears! Is he becoming emotional because of the deep feeling he has for his work or his patients? Not exactly. He puts down his cup and in an unsteady voice that is part desperation and part anger says, “I have no time.” I nod sympathetically. But he goes on: “You don’t understand. I have no time! I am pathologically busy. It’s beyond anything I have ever imagined. I can’t give anything the attention it needs. I can’t do anything well. I wake up in the middle of the night on the verge of a breakdown. And more and more people depend on me. More and more things, good things, important things, keep coming to me. And any one of them is worth the whole of my attention and needs my time. But then, twenty of them? A hundred of them? And it is the same with my staff. They are all being driven past their limits ...” My friend keeps talking and talking. I cannot find a moment to break in to say, “Yes, I understand. It’s the same with me.”

(Jacob Needleman, Time and the Soul, New York, Doubleday, 1998, p. 60)

In this conversation I recognized not only my life, but also the lives of many of my friends and parishioners. I realized that time was an element that had been missing from my life. But it was not only time. It was time alone. It was solitude. And in the same moment I realised that times I had spent alone over the years had been some of the best of my life.

(Solitude: A Neglected Path to God, Christopher C. Moore, Cowley Publications, Massachusetts, USA, 2001, p. 203).



The lack of taste for solitude and silence is one of the most common illnesses of the modern person. Many are even scared of remaining in stillness, being alone or having free time: they feel more comfortable being constantly occupied; they need words, impressions; they always hasten in order to have the illusion of an abundant and saturated life. But life in God begins when words and thoughts fall silent, when worldly cares are forgotten, and when a place within the human soul is freed to be filled by Him.

Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev of Volokolamsk

ENTER INTO SILENCE

DISCOVER MOMENTS OF INTIMACY

Each day I look forward to quiet time with God. Even when I'm on the road I take a small candle and icon with me so that when I wake in my hotel room, I'm not alone or scattered. Instead, with a little icon and burning candle, I can sit quietly with the Lord so my night's thoughts and desires and worries in the morning can arise, unfold, and dissipate with the flame to God.

In this way I am centred before going out. Remembering what is really important in life is helpful as I prepare to face others. I am not tossed around by feelings, reactions, rejections or apprehensions that have nothing to do with what life is truly about.

Silence never comes instantly. We are trained to be distracted (even when we are asleep, we are often filled with thinking, telephoning, entertaining and accomplishing. When we stop, the roar takes some time to quieten down. Sometimes the noises settle into one theme (e.g. a confrontation which may be coming up later in the day) that we need to hand over to God. Other times, the noise lessens and we are allowed to just sit warmed by the light of God. These are moments of divine intimacy. It is at these moments that we cease listening for the words of God and allow the silence to somehow teach, comfort and console us. The silence itself becomes the voice of God in some strange way.

Most of us yearn for this silence especially in the morning and evening. But we have a storehouse of excuses as to why it is not practical:

"My house is too noisy to find quiet."

"There is no place where I can sit for a few minutes in silence."

"My prayer never seems to be like that of the people who write about prayer."

"When I sit and pray, I just worry."

"I get good ideas which I get up to write down before I forget them."

"I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"I've never prayed very well except for times when things are bad."

"I just fall asleep when I sit quietly in the morning or evening."

The excuses are understandable, endless and are still, well, excuses. If we want to enter into a refreshing quiet place within ourselves we will need to have patience and exert some effort. As a matter of fact, such a place is already there within us. We were born with a natural childlike wonder and joy within. With some quiet and perseverance, and a few simple steps, we will see it again in ourselves.

Here are a few simple actions that can be part of your "little rule"

- Find a quiet place in the morning and/or evening where you can retreat for a little silence and solitude. When a quiet place is almost impossible to find in a busy household or small apartment, I have gotten up earlier or

stayed up later than everyone else. I've stayed in bed awake, used the bathroom, or sat in a corner with a book as if I were reading. But having a corner or room where you can go and close the door is ideal. A familiar place without so many immediate distractions helps one settle down for silent prayer. I find that lighting a candle before a little icon or inspiring picture also signals to me that I am being more intentional about God's presence in my life. It further dampens the distracting noise in my mind and reminds me that life is short and today is my eternity, so I'd better pay attention to the now. Someone once said to me "life is something that happens while we are busy doing something else." So, this lighting of the candle is a gentle nudge to wake up to precious time I have been given.

- Sometimes it helps to soften the soul by reading a little bit of scripture or a few pages of spiritual reading. These words are not meant for analysis, but simply as a companion to sit with you.
- If you find yourself worrying and feeling worse in silence, then stop and turn to a line of scripture or a favourite inspirational book. There are so many to choose from. Christians can take a word from Thomas Merton, Hindu's can choose a line from Paramahansa Yogananda's book *In the Sanctuary of the Soul*, Jews can reflect on a line or two from Abraham Heschel, and Buddhists can reflection the written advice of the Dalai Lama. And of course each tradition has its own sacred scriptures. Whatever line you choose, it should remind you of God's love and the peace that is possible when one is not mesmerised with personal faults or the sins of others.
- When it seems that there is nothing happening in prayer, patience is important. If you feel extremely distracted, repeating a certain word (love, Lord, gentleness) can help to settle your soul. If you feel like a perennial beginner, remember the words of Thomas Merton: "In prayer we are always in over our heads."
- If prayer is seen as just another thing to do, another duty, another time to please someone else, it is important to reframe it. Silence and solitude is a time and place to relax and to be loved. Even if one doesn't feel this love, the idea of love should be held in mind until it falls into the heart.

This simple advice is meant as an encouragement to spend time in silence and solitude as a way of feeling at ease, loved and free. They can encourage us to welcome solitude where we can be alone with God instead of being caught in a life of grasping, attachment and painful destructive desire.

FOR REFLECTION

"When you are faithful in [silent meditation] ... you will slowly experience yourself in a deeper way. Because in this useless hour in which you do nothing "important" or "urgent" you have come to terms with your basic powerlessness, you have to feel your fundamental inability to solve your or other people's

problems or to change the world. When you do not avoid that experience but live through it, you will find out that your many projects, plans and obligations become less urgent, crucial, and important and lose their power over you. They will leave you free during your time with God and take their appropriate place in your life. “

- *Abbot John Euches Bamberger speaking to Henri Nouwen*

AN EXPERIENCE OF SOLITUDE

WAKEN IN THE DARK AND SETTLE YOURSELF OUTSIDE OR NEAR A WINDOW

It's counter intuitive in this culture to wake while it's still dark. We're rarely aware anymore of the natural rhythm of an agricultural life. When you first begin this practice, it may seem difficult to pull yourself out of your warm sleeping place when light hasn't yet even brushed the sky. Be patient with yourself as your body begins to readjust to the pattern of getting up in the dark. Only a few experiences of being engulfed in the vast black silence will be needed to create a desire within you to arise even when it feels like the middle of the night.

TAKE A FEW MINUTES TO BE AWARE OF THE DARKNESS AROUND YOU

There was a time when I found the dark oppressive. So much in our world and in your religious tradition leads us to see darkness as evil and light as goodness. We're accustomed to turning on the lights in a darkened room rather than sitting quietly in the blackness. We're more likely to take a walk in the briskness of a bright sunny morning than at night time under the moonless sky. Because we avoid darkness, it's good to begin this practice by noting how the darkness feels and what emotions rise in you as you feel yourself held in it. Pay attention to the feeling of not being able to detect shapes, of needing to grope your way through the room, of the desire to flick on a light switch, of the length of time needed for your eyes to begin to adjust to the darkness. Note also any emotional feelings that surface in you. Are you afraid, uneasy, puzzled by what you can't see? Do you feel any safety and security in the darkness because you're anonymous there?

BE AWARE OF GOD'S PRESENCE IN YOU

It's not always easy to detect the presence of God within us. We're not sure what to look for, and we feel presumptuous or foolhardy to think we know what that presence is like. We may not think ourselves worthy of God to reside in us. We may be afraid to turn that awareness to that presence lest we find we were mistaken and it's not there after all. We may be hesitant to acknowledge that presence we're unwilling to face the demands that we assume will be placed upon us. To get a sense of this presence, close your eyes and feel the breath

moving in and out of your nostrils. Place your hand over your heart and feel the beat of life within you. Let the breath and beat come together in a balanced rhythm and feel the spirit of God flowing quietly but certainly through you.

AS THE DAWN BEGINS TO BE BORN, IMAGINE A CURTAIN OF DARKNESS BEING RAISED FROM YOUR SOUL

Just as nature provides a steady and dependable rhythm to the day, you can know a similar rhythm is being lived out in your soul. As the sun slowly rises, the thick heavy drape of darkness is lifted and the light emerges, as if for the first time, nascent and fresh, no darkness to the transition, no favouring of one over the other, no sense of competition. It's a silent and balanced movement. As you watch that balanced movement, visualize that same drape of darkness being lifted from your soul and feel yourself being clothed in light. How gentle is the shift? Do you feel yourself wanting to hurry the process? Is there any sense of uneasiness within you? Do you feel your soul becoming more buoyant, more lithe? Is there a willingness to "wake up" to the presence of God in your soul, as if for the first time? Sit in silence until the light has fully come into the sky, being aware of the subtle alterations that the same change brings in your own body.

SAY A PRAYER OF GREETING TO THE DAY AND TO GOD

Every new day is a gift, and every new day ought to be honoured with a greeting of welcome and thanksgiving. It's much too easy to take each new day for granted and move immediately to the tasks and responsibilities that await you, barely taking notice that the birth has occurred, and a miracle has been unveiled, a sure and certain rhythm has given you a place of grounding once again. Greet the new born day as you would a new born infant – with joy, with delight, with muted awe. Just as each new day brings with it the possibility of another chance at life, so each new day brings with it the chance for you to be renewed.

As you sit still in the new day's light, take a few moments to let your heart speak its contents to the Holy One who has given the light, the renewal, the rhythm. Let the exchange between heaven and earth occur within your own soul as you offer to God a prayer of thanks for the wonder of another day of life.

TAKE FIVE MINUTES TO WRITE YOUR FEELINGS IN A JOURNAL

Journaling can feel like an onerous task after you've been engaged in mindful attention and reflection. You might even resist trying to capture on paper what's been so wordlessly experienced within. But the very action of scratching onto paper the feelings and impressions floating through your inner self helps to deepen and etch the experience on your soul. It has another purpose as well. It's a way of making the transition from meditation to lived life, of grounding and readying yourself for the day's activities. You don't need to write much. You don't need to write well. You don't need to capture every thought, every feeling. You simply need to take pen in hand and bring yourself into the present moment and record in short phrases what's occurred in you during the moments you've spent

watching the earth change from night to day. The very action of writing is a way to give reverence to the beauty of your soul and the wonder of life.

Fertile Soil in a Barren Land - A Desert Odyssey For the Soul, Renee Miller, Morehouse Publications, 2005, p. 4-7

AN EXPERIENCE OF SOLITUDE

COMMIT TO A TIME

It seems odd to think that solitude should be scheduled, but because of the complexity of our lives and our almost natural inclination to avoid solitude, the first place to begin practicing solitude is to open the calendar and set aside a time to get out of the whirlwind of daily life into the world of solitude. You will probably notice that many excuses rise to the surface. The items on the calendar and the preparations needed to complete those items will eclipse the desire to commit to rearranging the schedule to accommodate the solitude that quietly beckons. The production of results is so highly prized in our culture that the notion of secluding ourselves away in a cocoon of nonproductivity seems a dreamy shadowland of possibility for others, but hardly practical for ourselves. When the excuses loom, try to listen to the whisper of the Spirit within you calling you to “come away and rest awhile”. Take a pen in hand, clear a few days, a day, a week or a month and scratch time for solitude in the calendar. Then observe the release, the relief, the refreshment that seems to waft over your soul once you lay the pen and calendar down.

PLAN THE PLACE

While desert solitude in a geographical desert may be ideal, it may not be realistic. Desert solitude is actually more expansive than a simple topography. As Franz Wafka wrote, “You do not need to leave your room.” Or, as the early Desert Fathers relentlessly reminded his disciples, “Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.” The place you choose as your womb of seclusion can be as near to you as your own bedroom or as distant as the Himalayas. The actual physical space is not important because the space is just the container within which you will be invited to descend into the protective and instructive embrace of the holy solitude for which you are longing. If, however, you are uncertain about the feasibility of staying in your own home, look in the phone book for a nearby convent or monastery. A small room in a place where holiness has been practiced for years and years will make it easier for you to hear the call of the Holy One who will be waiting for you there.

PACK LIGHTLY

It will be incredibly seductive to pack your bags with all sorts of things that will fill your solitude. This is merely a feeble attempt by your mind to quiet the rising terror that you’ll be bored, lonely, and unable to cope with the raggedness of being cut off from what is known, what is familiar, what characteristically fills your days and nights. You may feel that you want solitude, but you will feel yourself wanting to have possible diversions just in case the solitude is more demanding than you can bear. Resist the temptation to take things to occupy yourself. Instead, prepare for your isolated journey choosing your favourite Bible – the one that feels and smells and reads like God to you. Carefully place it in your bag with your meager provision of clothing. Then go and purchase a journal

that feels like it's ready to hold your thoughts and conversations with God. Put it in the suitcase with your Bible. Choose a pen or pencil that you'll want to write with in the time of your solitariness. Resist the urge to take more than one pen! Then, close your suitcase. Nothing but your Bible, journal and pen, clothes and toiletries need accompany you into the place that your soul is headed. All else that you need there will be given to you by God. In the deep, deep space of aloneness, you'll speak to heaven and heaven will speak to you. The Bible will be the words through which you will speak to God and the journal will be the place of record – the record of God's work spoken to you. It will become a kind of personal scripture that contains the questions, fears, boredom, and loneliness of your own soul, and the revelations and resolutions that come quietly to you in the silence. The Bible and your journal will become your companions and through them your desert solitude will become the canvas on which you converse with the One who loved you into being. As you near the time of your departing, commit yourself to God and even in the moment of your desire to forgo the journey and stay at home, remember that even before your journey was planned, God had already prepared you for a great gift. It awaits you in the desert.

Fertile Soil in a Barren Land - A Desert Odyssey For the Soul, Renee Miller, Morehouse Publications, 2005, p. 14-16

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REFLECTIONS ON SOLITUDE

1. Have you had an experience of solitude that changed your life? What were the circumstances? How did it change you?
2. Are you aware of a desire to experience more solitude in your own life, or are the ways you currently experience solitude sufficient to address your need? How does a need for solitude manifest itself in your life?
3. In what ways do you find that our culture discourages individuals from being alone? How do you see a hunger for solitude reflected in the larger society and in the lives of people you know?
4. Some of the gifts of solitude include greater attentiveness to one's surroundings, insight, clarity, and an awareness of the presence of God. How do you experience any of these gifts during periods of solitude? What other gifts have you experienced? How have you integrated them into your life?
5. How do you describe your own attitude toward solitude? Do you tend to resist it or to welcome opportunities for it? What circumstances in your own past have contributed to this attitude?
6. Often people distinguish between solitude and loneliness. Think back to times in your own life. How would you describe the difference between solitude and loneliness? Does the fear of loneliness discourage you from seeking solitude?
7. Sometimes solitude can be the best means for working through personal crisis. Recollect such a time of crisis in your life. What part, if any, did solitude play?
8. Has it been your experience that opportunities for solitude, and the need for it, change throughout life? Which periods of life have given you the most solitude? The least? Are you experiencing the right balance between solitude and involvement in your present stage in life?
9. Do you think that men and women tend to seek solitude in different ways? How does this relate to your own experience? Describe some practical strategies you have worked out with a loved one to accommodate your differing needs for solitude?
10. Have you ever experienced God's presence in solitude? What were the circumstances? How were you subsequently able to integrate the fruits of this experience into your life and faith?
11. Do you see solitude as an escape from the problems of the world or an opportunity to wrestle with them? Recollect a time when you struggled

with a personal crisis in solitude. What were the qualities of solitude that enabled you to resolve your problems?

12. Do you have a special place where you go periodically to renew yourself? Where is it? Are there common elements in the special places you have had throughout life?

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