

SOLITUDE: SOLITUDE AND CARMELITE SPIRITUALITY

Let me begin by saying that solitude is not the same as isolation. The latter is "an unhealthy withdrawal from human society; a turning in on oneself that is only too often a trait of neurosis. Solitude, in contrast, is a healthy turning toward one's beloved."¹ Solitude, when it is healthy, will bring us closer to our Lord Jesus Christ and not lead us away from Him. If one finds it difficult to live with others, one will surely find it difficult to live alone. Solitude is not intended to be empty and void, but alive and filled with activity; the activity of loving and communicating with Jesus, be it a prayer of thanksgiving or just enjoying God. Contemplative prayer and solitude should be restful and not fill us with boredom and anxiety.

Solitude should give us an opportunity to make advances in prayer but, in order for this to happen, we must free our mind of anxiety and learn to put aside all of our worry. Learning to be with God does not happen over night. This period of communication strikes fear even into the hearts of priest and religious. In our society we are taught to abhor solitude. Television, radio and other distractions make it very difficult for us to appreciate being alone.

"Silence and solitude does not refer only to the lessening of decibels."² It is almost impossible for us here at Carmel, to commune with the Indwelling Spirit unless we withdraw from the hustle and bustle of the world. This does not always mean that we must physically withdraw. Often this is not possible, but we can withdraw ourselves spiritually. A divided attention is an exhausting attention. If we drain our psychic energies by the endless multiplicities of images and sounds, many of them garrish and deafening, we cannot retain the inner stamina^{NECESSARY} for prayer.

¹Dubay, T., Fire Within. Ignatius Press. p. 122

² Dubay, T. p. 123.

Prayer is so necessary for us to grow in virtue. It is impossible for one to practice prayer on a regular basis -- even though the prayer may be one of distraction, without a noticeable growth in virtue. "The divine presence is bound to transform one from sin to virtue and eventually from common goodness to heroic sanctity."³ Often there are those whose periods of solitude are constantly interrupted because of their inordinate interest in the business of others. We should not meddle in things that do not concern us. If we can avoid the needless interfering in the lives of others we can and will avoid many distractions. Our inner peace is unsettled by gossip and our prayer life suffers. When we are trying to direct the actions of others our own affairs go unattended. So we must avoid letting the faults of others distress us. We should learn not to focus our attention on their petty faults. "The safe path for the soul that practices prayer will not be to bother about anything or anyone and to pay attention to itself and pleasing God."⁴ This does not mean we are not to be concerned about others.

The spiritual experience that one has in solitude, of course, varies from person to person, but you and I realize "that God treats each of us differently," Though He has several times entered into me, he has never made His coming apparent to my sight, hearing, or touch. It was not by His motions that He was recognized by me, nor could I tell by any of my senses that He had penetrated to the depths of my being. Only by the movement of my heart ^{was} I enabled to recognize His presence, I know the might of His power by the sudden departure of vices and strong restraint put upon all carnal affections."⁵ And it is by God's mercy and grace that we discover and are

³ Dubay, T, p. 123.

⁴ Dubay, p. 124.

⁵ Holden, Walter, ed., Silent Fire. Harper Forum Books. p. 49

convinced of our secret faults. How can we but admire the depths of the wisdom of God? The goodness and kindness of so loving a God we are aware of and we have perceived in some degree the loveliness of his beauty, and have been filled with amazement at the magnitude of his greatness.

When the Word withdraws Himself, it seems as if the fire had been withdrawn from a bubbling pot, and this is to us the sign of the departure of our Lord. Then the soul is necessarily sad and depressed until He shall return and our hearts grows warm within us, which is indeed an indication that He has come back again.

We are not to become too attached to these consolations, but always remember that we do not deserve them, God only grants them out of his loving kindness and compassion for us.

This coming and going of Jesus is not the only consolation for the Carmelite soul. God also brings with Himself mystical healing. This healing begins with the call of love at the core of our being, at the center of our soul.

"This is the voice of the Spirit of God calling to union through an obscure sense of presence or a deeper interior silence or a longing for solitude or a simple desire for God. Hearing this voice, we begin the inner journey which is joyful because it is filled with love, but painful because, like Abraham, we must pass from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from a state of consciousness which enjoys one set of beautiful things to a state of awareness -- which values another."⁶ We are being led by the Spirit of God and we know not where we are going. Yes, we are fearful on this journey but our love for God and our faith in Him compels us to continue. Our faith in God sets our hearts on fire and the thought of turning back never enters our mind. One reason we can't turn back is because our soul is being drawn by the love of God. We are captivated by the silent voice of God that whispers, urging us onward; a voice so sweet, so alluring, that it can't be resisted. This voice of the spirit of God captivated

⁶ Johnston, William, The Inner eye of Love. Harper, Row. p. 128

John and Teresa just as it holds us and every Carmelite captive.

Profound changes are taking place in the solitude of our soul. We begin to see things in a new way. "We may seem like a different person to ourselves and others."⁷

We are being made a stranger to this unusual knowledge and experience things in a new way. In all this process we are growing and our consciousness is being expanded. We are becoming more ourselves; the most profound area of our psyche is being activated and brought to life.

Carmelites will agree that, as our consciousness expands and we reach new levels of awareness, we are not in heaven yet but still suffer from conflict, both inner and outer. Great changes are going on within each of us. Changes that we are not aware of. The storms that occur within shake our confidence in ourselves and in God. We are being stripped bare of all self-love and everything but Himself. We are frightened -- frightened of ourselves, the world and the devil. We fear that we may lose the God we love so much and this sets our hearts to tremble. It is the voice of Jesus that whispers in our moments of solitude, "Be not afraid--I'm with you".

We here at Carmel realize we "are not long into our spiritual journey when we receive our first taste of silence and soon every bit of wisdom it contains. Silence whets the appetite for a spiritual nourishment. When we become aware of its benefits, we locate a time for silence in our daily lives. To know silence and find time for it is no easy task. Knowledge enters into silence when silence balances speaking and fosters openness to others. Silence restores us to our authentic selves."⁸

Many of us in the beginning of our spiritual journey did not feel at home with silence. Odd thoughts came to mind. Perhaps family members looked at

⁷ Inner Eye of Love, p. 128

⁸ "On Silence", Carmelite Digest, Winter 1993, p. 46.

us in a strange manner and thought we were somewhat odd. We, in the beginning, could not help feeling self-conscious, artificial, embarrassed or just plain out of place. Soon we found that silence is more than something we at Carmel practice. It is a gift from God that helps us gradually let go of our congested thoughts and preoccupations.

We know we grow in prayer through silence. For it is here in the state of solitude that we hear the word of God. Out of silence, God spoke one word through which the world was created and redeemed. The one word God spoke was His Son. And everything that was created was created in and for Him and without Him nothing was created. If we are quietly attentive and receptive to this Word, we will gradually learn ^{many} things.

If too much silence comes too early in our spiritual journey, we may use it for mystical fantasies, self-defeating introspections, spiritual ego-enhancements or other nonsense.

We must be careful, some of us want to experience the dimensions of silence all at once. There are some who try to learn all they can about silence in a month or less, only to find that a quiet weekend retreat or article or book about it seems like a cup of water that barely satisfies a burning thirst.

Discovering the richness of silence is a life-long process and discovering its various treasures may take place at the least-expected times. Silence has many flowers that bloom in the different seasons of our lives.

Exterior and interior silence compliment each other. One can't exist without the other. They can be positive or negative, filling or emptying our spiritual arsenal.

Silence, like running water, will move blocked areas within us. If we practice interior silence and are faithful to prayer, silence will flow over us, and as it does, it cleanses, changes, and converts us to ^{become} greater receptors of God's mysterious love.

The lessons we learn from silence may be slow in coming but sometimes

quite revealing. ^{They} force us to look at our jobs, homes, families, social activities, entertainment and spiritual exercises.

Positive, peaceful silence communicates love more than most words *can do*. Silence between friends shows they are comfortable and at home in each other's presence. The need to fill up unexpected silent periods with words is no longer necessary. When visiting a person who is sick, silence can foster potential, courtesy, respect and healing. Silence decreases our egoism.

We here at Carmel will not learn to love silence until we make an effort to be silent and pray for God's help and grace.

Carmelites learn more about silence by being silent, and from our very silence is born something that draws us to deeper silence.

Silence makes us more aware of our own sinfulness and we realize that we are capable of committing the vilest of sins. The hidden sinister voice of evil makes itself heard in the least likely places. We feel strongly tempted, but remember that temptations are not sins.

Reflecting upon the vastness and silence of God leads a person to a deep inner seriousness and thoughtfulness. We become more reflective and we become liberated from the need to respond immediately to inordinate desires that come from within or without. The autocratic need for assertion, attention, service recognition or making an impression is dulled and dimmed. As these needs are silenced, the sacred art of listening begins to emerge.

Being silent is not a negative act, but rather very positive. Carmelites are in the habit of cultivating silence in the heart and mind and letting God have a word. We realize that it is not easy to learn to cherish silence. The secret of silence is God's presence, which is a creative force. In quiet recollection, he slowly creates a soul with His own music.⁹

So we realize that if we are to love the spiritual life, we must appreciate silence and solitude and, as I have said before, this helps us become aware of

⁹ Carmelite Digest, Winter, 1993, p. 21.

the presence of God, who is all enveloped in silence in our soul. When we develop the habit of silence, "a silencing and ordering of our senses, we become enveloped in silence, in the depths of our soul".¹⁰ Silence and solitude can be a form of prayer.

Our Holy Father, St. John of the Cross describes the need for this type of prayer in this way: "The religious must practice the following instructions if he or she wishes to attain, in a short time, holy recollection and spiritual silence, nakedness, and poverty, where one enjoys the peaceful comfort of the Holy Spirit, reaches union with God, is freed of all the obstacles incurred from the creatures of this world, defended against the wiles and deceits of the devil, and liberated from one's own self. By the practice of recollection, you will attain silence and peace in the senses." Not only Carmel but all people are called to this life of prayer and to this experience of Christ's peace and solitude.

We must remember that this interior and exterior silencing is a practical guide for living in the divine presence and in human society. Wisdom enters through love, silence and mortification. And as I have said, it is great wisdom to know how to be silent and to look at neither the remarks, nor the deeds nor the lives of others. Not observing the imperfections of others, preserving silence and a continual communion with God will eradicate great imperfections from the soul and make it the possessor of great virtue.

Although this silencing of our inordinate desires and the habitual practicing of the virtues is primarily dependent on the grace of God, it is also necessary for us to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. This active silencing is a natural operation of the soul. The mystery of God is experienced in His infinite and creative silence.

The Father spoke one word, which was His Son, and this word He always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence, must it be heard by the soul.

¹⁰ "Silent Love", Carmelite Digest, p. 49.

When we seek to develop the habit and virtue of silence, especially in our present, so vocal society we should remember we are not to be rude to others but must welcome each person kindly, to keep matters short and to have people leave our presence comforted.¹¹ We are not to put on a sad face like the Publican in the temple who prays just to be seen, but we are to practice mortification in silence. Solitude is not something that we should fear and dread but something that we should cling to, remembering that this brings us closer to God.

As secular Carmelites, we must bear in mind that we are endowed with mystical knowledge, even if it is in its infancy for most of us, and we are very active people. We live in noisy cities and are bombarded by noise *at* every turn. If we stop and withdraw within ^{To} that secret solitary room in the depths of our soul, we will become conscious, not only of the Spirit of God present in us, not only Christ being in us, but ^{ALSO} of Christ dynamically alive in us and driving us to spiritual union with other members of the mystical body of Christ.

We are active people, it is true, but we need periods of silence and solitude. It is also true that we carry around in our hearts a great solitude which is also a great love, and this solitude continues in the midst of activity. It is solitude which is deepened by the hurt, the criticism, the disappointment, the betrayal, the human friction, the humiliation and the ordinary pain of living. These pains of life deepen our contemplative experience. Without this kind of suffering, it is difficult to see how one can die to self in order to live to *the* One who rose from the dead. Frequently it is through the suffering of action that the inner eye is opened and we truly come to see.¹²

Sometimes it is very hard to quiet the soul but the Carmelite realizes that God comes to such a one. It is He who says, "Peace be still" and once the

¹¹ Suso, Henry, The Life of the Servant. Paulist Press, p. 86.

¹² The Inner Eye of Love. Harper & Row, p. 39

soul is quiet, it is then that God makes it His abode. It is then the soul “communes inwardly with God, alone and in solitude devoid of all forms, and with delightful tranquility, for the knowledge of God is received in divine silence.”¹³

If you and I desire that true devotion and love of God and Jesus Christ be born in our spirit, and that the love of God and the desire for divine things increase, we must, by the grace of God, cleanse our soul of *other* desire, attachment, and ambition in such a way that we leave no concern about anything other than that which God wishes. *We will not advance in our spiritual life no matter how much we do unless we allow this cleansing.*

So if we seek to find peace in our silence and solitude, consolation for our souls and to serve God truly, we must not try to find our satisfaction in what we have left behind. *We must leave, as well, all these other things that we may find attractive and attend to one thing alone that brings all things with it, namely, holy solitude. Together with prayer and spiritual and divine reading we persevere there in forgetfulness of all things. For if these things are not a stumbling block for us, we will be more pleasing to God in knowing how to guard and perfect ourselves by gaining all other things.* “What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of one’s soul.” (Mt. 16:26)

So as we continue to journey on our spiritual way and grow in our love for solitude and silence we also have a greater appreciation for surrender and detachment. In our solitary life we experience so many wonderful things known only to God, or holy angels and to ourselves. This is not to say that everything or, for that matter most of the things, that God grants to the soul we are aware of. In fact, more things are wrought in the hidden recesses of our soul by so loving a God than we could ever imagine. I believe if we really *want* to grow in our spiritual life and grow quickly, “we should look intently to our blessed

¹³ Kavanaugh, Kieran O.C.D, Collected Works of St. John of the Cross. p. 88.

Mother, Mary, so as to learn from her example what we should do in our seclusion".¹⁴

"If we try to discover what occupied her (Madeleine DeSaint Joseph), we will find that the Son of God was the only focus of her attention. He was her life and her all and nothing but him had any part in her. Thus, if we wish to live in authentic solitude, let us banish from our minds, all esteem, all love and all desire for the earth and the present, in order to be taken up solely with God who totally fulfilled that soul, which was so rare and outstanding in grace and love. We at Carmel must continue to contemplate our Lord in His grandeurs and in His humiliations. Let us adore His holy person. Let us consider His mysteries. Let us reverence His wisdom. Let us submit ourselves to His power. Let us admire and love his infinite goodness and charity. Let us acknowledge his blessings. Let us listen to His words of grace and eternal life. Let us show him our misery. Let us open to him the depth of our hearts, desiring that He fill them, take total possession of them and that He operate in them according to His divine plan. Since He has designed to lower Himself to the very vile and miserable thing that we are and to live closely with us, let us ask that He might be gracious enough to teach us how to live closely with Him and that He not allow that we or any other creature occupy the place in us that He alone should fill".¹⁵

As we continue to seek to love God with all our hearts and as we grow in the love of solitude and silence, our fears become less and many of them totally disappear. So also will those things disappear from our desires that stand between God and the soul, as John of the Cross said of Our Lord, "You dried up and subdued in me the appetites and passions that in our flesh are the breasts and milk of Mother Eve, and an impediment to this (holy) state. And

¹⁴ Joseph, Madeleine DeSaint, Berulle and the French School. Paulist Press, p. 207.

¹⁵ Joseph, Madeleine DeSaint, Berulle and the French School. p. 207.

when this is accomplished, 'that I may find you alone inside,' that is outside of all things and of myself, in solitude and nakedness of spirit, which is attained when the appetites are dried up and that my nature now alone and denuded of all temporal, natural and spiritual impurity may be united with you alone, with your nature alone, through no intermediary. This union is found only in the spiritual marriage, in which the soul kisses God without contempt or disturbance from anyone. For in this state neither the devil, the flesh, the world, nor the appetites molest her.¹⁶

When the Carmelite soul has become established in the quietude of solitary love of her Lord, she becomes settled in God, and God in her with so much delight that she has no need for other masters or means to direct her to Him, for now God is her guide and her light. He accomplishes in her what he promised through Hosea. "I shall lead her into solitude and there speak to her heart." In this promise, God reveals that He communicates and unites himself to the soul in solitude. To speak to the heart is to satisfy the heart, which is dissatisfied with anything less than God.

*She lived in Solitude
And now in solitude has built her nest;
And in solitude He guides her,
He alone, who also bears
In solitude the wound of love.*

We are content to live in solitude for it is here we know that we can find God and God can find us. For it is here that God can flood our soul with His gifts and we are withdrawn from all of our former afflictions and fatigues which have been brought on by our divided spirit which saps our energy. And it is in solitude that God caresses us and feeds us in Himself with every blessing,

¹⁶ Collected Works of John of the Cross, p. 562.

guiding us to the high things of God. God is our guide alone for He needs no help. God grant us, through this solitude, true liberty of spirit that is not bound to any created thing. In this solitude in which the soul lives consists the desire to go without the things that are displeasing to God, because we love God so. God grant us the grace, these graces we have received in solitude, to strive harder for perfection and acquiring even more perfect solitude in which God permits us to reach union with the Word, the Son of God through the Holy Spirit.

It is in solitude that we attain complete refreshment and rest. Before, when we tried to practice solitude alone without the calling and becoming of God, when God was not ready to lead us into the secret caverns of our soul, we suffered in trials and anguish because we wanted, *in our* pride, to do everything for ourselves, forgetting that with God as with nature, there is a season for all things. So in silence and in solitude, if we want to grow in perfection and love of God, we must wait on God. God will call us when He is ready and only then.