

# Thomas Merton - New Seeds of Contemplation

## Chapter 8: Solitude Is Not Separation

Some men have perhaps become hermits with the thought that sanctity could only be attained by escape from other men. But the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men. If you go into the desert merely to get away from people you dislike, you will find neither peace nor solitude; you will only isolate yourself with a tribe of devils.

Man seeks unity because he is the image of the One God. Unity implies solitude, and hence the need to be physically alone. But unity and solitude are not metaphysical isolation. He who isolates himself in order to enjoy a kind of independence in his egotistic and external self does not find unity at all, for he disintegrates into a multiplicity of conflicting passions and finally ends in confusion and total unreality. Solitude is not and can never be a narcissistic dialogue of the ego with itself. Such self-contemplation is a futile attempt to establish the finite self as infinite, to make it permanently independent of all other beings. And this is madness. Note, however, that it is not a madness peculiar to solitaries—it is much more common to those who try to assert their own unique excellence by dominating others. This is the more usual sin.

The need for true solitude is a complex and dangerous thing, but it is a real need. It is all the more real today when the collectivity tends more and more to swallow up the person in its shapeless and faceless mass. The temptation of our day is to equate “love” and “conformity”—passive subservience to the mass-mind or to the organization. This temptation is only strengthened by futile rebellion on the part of eccentrics who want to be madly and notably different and who thereby create for themselves only a new kind of dullness—a dullness that is erratic instead of predictable.

True solitude is the home of the person, false solitude the refuge of the individualist. The person is constituted by a uniquely subsisting capacity to love—by a radical ability to care for all beings made by God and loved by Him. Such a capacity is destroyed by the loss of perspective. Without a certain element of solitude there can be no compassion because when a man is lost in the wheels of a social machine he is no longer aware of human needs as a matter of personal responsibility. One can escape from men by plunging into the midst of a crowd!

Go into the desert not to escape other men but in order to find them in God.

Physical solitude has its dangers, but we must not exaggerate them. The great temptation of modern man is not physical solitude but immersion in the mass of other men, not escape to the mountains or the desert (would that more men were so tempted!) but escape into the great formless sea of irresponsibility which is the crowd. There is actually no more dangerous solitude than that of the man who is lost in a crowd, who does not know he is alone and who does not function as a person in a community either. He does not face the risks of true solitude or its responsibilities, and at the same time the multitude has taken all other responsibilities off his shoulders. Yet he is by no means free of care; he is burdened by the diffuse, anonymous anxiety, the nameless fears, the petty itching lusts and the all pervading hostilities which fill mass society the way water fills the ocean.

Mere living in the midst of other men does not guarantee that we live in communion with them or even in communication with them. Who has less to communicate than the mass-man? Very often it is the solitary who has the most to say; not that he uses many words, but what he says is new, substantial, unique. It is his own. Even though he says very little, he has something to communicate, something personal which he is able to share with others. He has something real to give because he himself is real.

Where men live huddled together without true communication there seems to be greater sharing, and a more genuine communion. But this is not communion, only immersion in the general meaninglessness of countless slogans and clichés repeated over and over again so that in the end one listens without hearing and responds without thinking. The constant din of empty words and machine noises, the endless booming of loudspeakers end by making true communication and true communion almost impossible. Each individual in the mass is insulated by thick layers of insensibility. He doesn't care, he doesn't hear, he doesn't think. He does not act, he is pushed. He does not talk, he produces conventional sounds when stimulated by the appropriate noises. He does not think, he secretes clichés.

Mere living alone does not isolate a man, mere living together does not bring men into communion. The common life can either make one more of a person or less of a person, depending whether it is truly common life or merely life in a crowd. To live in communion, in genuine dialogue with others is absolutely necessary if man is to remain human. But to live in the midst of others, sharing nothing with them but the common noise and the general distraction, isolates a man

in the worst way, separates him from reality in a way that is almost painless. It divides him off and separates him from other men and from his true self. Here the sin is not in the conviction that one is not like other men, but in the belief that being like them is sufficient to cover every other sin. The complacency of the individual who admires his own excellence is bad enough, but it is more respectable than the complacency of the man who has no self-esteem because he has not even a superficial self which he can esteem. He is not a person, not an individual, only an atom. This atomized existence is sometimes praised as humility or as self-sacrifice, sometimes it is called obedience, sometimes it is devotion to the dialectic of class war. It produces a kind of peace which is not peace, but only the escape from an immediately urgent sense of conflict. It is the peace not of love but of anesthesia. It is the peace not of self-realization and self-dedication, but of flight into irresponsibility.

There is no true solitude except interior solitude. And interior solitude is not possible for anyone who does not accept his right place in relation to other men. There is no true peace possible for the man who still imagines that some accident of talent or grace or virtue segregates him from other men and places him above them. Solitude is not separation.

God does not give us graces or talents or virtues for ourselves alone. We are members one of another and everything that is given to one member is given for the whole body. I do not wash my feet to make them more beautiful than my face.

The saints love their sanctity not because it separates them from the rest of us and places them above us, but because, on the contrary, it brings them closer to us and in a sense places them below us. Their sanctity is given them in order that they may help us and serve us—for the saints are like doctors and nurses who are better than the sick in the sense that they are healthy and possess arts of healing them, and yet they make themselves the servants of the sick and devote their own health and their art to them.

The saints are what they are, not because their sanctity makes them admirable to others, but *because the gift of sainthood makes it possible for them to admire everybody else*. It gives them a clarity of compassion that can find good in the most terrible criminals. It delivers them from the burden of judging others, condemning other men. It teaches them to bring the good out of others by compassion, mercy and pardon. A man becomes a saint not by conviction that he is

better than sinners but by the realization that he is one of them, and that all together need the mercy of God!

In humility is the greatest freedom. As long as you have to defend the imaginary self that you think is important, you lose your peace of heart. As soon as you compare that shadow with the shadows of other people, you lose all joy, because you have begun to trade in unrealities, and there is no joy in things that do not exist.

As soon as you begin to take yourself seriously and imagine that your virtues are important because they are yours, you become the prisoner of your own vanity and even your best works will blind and deceive you. Then, in order to defend yourself, you will begin to see sins and faults everywhere in the actions of other men. And the more unreasonable importance you attach to yourself and to your own works, the more you will tend to build up your own idea of yourself by condemning other people. Sometimes virtuous men are also bitter and unhappy, because they have unconsciously come to believe that all their happiness depends on their being more virtuous than others.

When humility delivers a man from attachment to his own works and his own reputation, he discovers that perfect joy is possible only when we have completely forgotten ourselves. And it is only when we pay no more attention to our own deeds and our own reputation and our own excellence that we are at last completely free to serve God in perfection for His own sake alone.

A man who is not stripped and poor and naked within his own soul will unconsciously tend to do the works he has to do for his own sake rather than for the glory of God. He will be virtuous not because he loves God's will but because he wants to admire his own virtues. But every moment of the day will bring him some frustration that will make him bitter and impatient and in his impatience he will be discovered.

He has planned to do spectacular things. He cannot conceive himself without a halo. And when the events of his daily life keep reminding him of his own insignificance and mediocrity, he is ashamed, and his pride refuses to swallow a truth at which no sane man should be surprised.

Even the professionally pious, and sometimes the pious most of all, can waste their time in competition with one another, in which nothing is found but misery.

More than once Jesus had to rebuke His Apostles, who were wrangling among themselves and fighting for the first places in His Kingdom. Two of them, James and John, intrigued for the seats on His

right and left hand in the Kingdom. It is not unusual, in the lives of the saints, to find that saints did not always agree with saints. Peter did not always agree with Paul, or Philip Neri with Charles Borromeo. And sometimes very holy men have been very exasperating people and tiresome to live with. If you do not believe me, perhaps it is because you think that the saints were always perfect, and never had any faults to fight against. But God sometimes permits men to retain certain defects and imperfections, blind-spots and eccentricities, even after they have reached a high degree of sanctity, and because of these things their sanctity remains hidden from them and from other men. If the holiness of all the saints had always been plainly evident to everybody, they would never have been polished and perfected by trial, criticism, humiliation and opposition from the people they lived with.

Be content that you are not yet a saint, even though you realize that the only thing worth living for is sanctity. Then you will be satisfied to let God lead you to sanctity by paths that you cannot understand. You will travel in darkness in which you will no longer be concerned with yourself and no longer compare yourself with other men. Those who have gone by that way have finally found out that sanctity is in everything and that God is all around them. Having given up all desire to compete with other men, they suddenly wake up and find that the joy of God is everywhere, and they are able to exult in the virtues and goodness of others more than ever they could have done in their own. They are so dazzled by the reflection of God in the souls of the men they live with that they no longer have any power to condemn anything they see in another. Even in the greatest sinners they can see virtues and goodness that no one else can find. As for themselves, if they still consider themselves, they no longer dare to compare themselves with others. The idea has now become unthinkable. But it is no longer a source of suffering and lamentation: they have finally reached the point where they take their own insignificance for granted. They are no longer interested in their external selves.

To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love.

Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.

If, therefore, I do anything or think anything or say anything or know anything that is not purely for the love of God, it cannot give me peace, or rest, or fulfillment, or joy.

To find love I must enter into the sanctuary where it is hidden, which is the mystery of God. And to enter into His sanctity I must become holy as He is holy, perfect as He is perfect.

How can I even dare to entertain such a thought? Is it not madness? It is certainly madness if I think I know what the holiness and perfection of God really are in themselves and if I think that there is some way in which I can apply myself to imitating them. I must begin, then, by realizing that the holiness of God is something that is to me, and to all men, utterly mysterious, inscrutable, beyond the highest notion of any kind of perfection, beyond any relevant human statement whatever.

If I am to be “holy” I must therefore be something that I do not understand, something mysterious and hidden, something apparently self-contradictory for God, in Christ, “emptied Himself.” He became a man, and dwelt among sinners. He was considered a sinner. He was put to death as a blasphemer, as one who at least implicitly denied God, as one who revolted against the holiness of God. Indeed, the great question in the trial and condemnation of Christ was precisely the denial of God and the denial of His holiness. So God Himself was put to death on the cross because He did not measure up to man’s conception of His Holiness.

He was not holy enough, He was not holy in the right way, He was not holy in the way they had been led to expect. Therefore he was not God at all. And, indeed, He was abandoned and forsaken even by Himself. It was as if the Father had denied the Son, as if the Divine Power and mercy had utterly failed.

In dying on the Cross, Christ manifested the holiness of God in apparent contradiction with itself. But in reality this manifestation was the complete denial and rejection of all human ideas of holiness and perfection. The wisdom of God became folly to men, His power manifested itself as weakness, and His holiness was, in their eyes, unholy. But Scripture says that “what is great in the eyes of men is an abomination in the sight of God,” and again, “my thoughts are not your thoughts,” says God to men.

If, then, we want to seek some way of being holy, we must first of all renounce our own way and our own wisdom. We must “empty ourselves” as He did. We must “deny ourselves” and in some sense make ourselves “nothing” in order that we may live not so much in ourselves as in Him. We must live by a power and a light that seem not to be there. We must live by the strength of an apparent emptiness that is always truly empty and yet never fails to support us at every moment.

This is holiness.

None of this can be achieved by any effort of my own, by any striving of my own, by any competition with other men. It means leaving all the ways that men can follow or understand.

I who am without love cannot become love unless Love identifies me with Himself. But if He sends His own Love, Himself, to act and love in me and in all that I do, then I shall be transformed, I shall discover who I am and shall possess my true identity by losing myself in Him.

And that is what is called sanctity.

© The Merton Legacy Trust