

MYSTIC LIGHT

Alone for Others

RARELY, IN OUR TIMES, do social and political theorists praise solitude. Again and again such thoughtful writers as Alasdair MacIntyre and Robert Bellah tell us that moral rectitude, fundamental truthfulness, and all of the other virtues and skills that make us human depend upon society: upon our having a lifelong place within a social order and contemplating the historical “narrative” that defines the social order. While all this is no doubt true, it is no less true that our humanity depends on our capacity for being alone.

Christians may be disinclined to protest the neglect of solitude. Their ultimate goal, the kingdom of God, is after all a society, and their supreme moral principle, love, is a decidedly social virtue. Yet even a moment’s consideration of Christ must give them pause. The life and death of Christ were both strongly marked by solitude. True, Christ was accompanied in his mission by his disciples. But it is striking how little comprehension they seemed to have either of his words or of the destiny he was living out. At the end, in Gethsemane, they could not watch with him even one hour. And when he was arrested, all of them “forsook him and fled.” The lone figure of Christ on the Cross is perhaps the starkest symbol of solitude our culture possesses: Aren’t Christians forced to entertain the thought that solitude is closely connected with sanctity?

Traditionally, of course, they have. The figure of St. Anthony is a classical representation of the spirituality that flourishes in solitude; and St. Anthony is only one of the many fourth-century “desert

This article appeared in the April 1996 issue of First Things and is reproduced here by permission. The writer is author of The Political Meaning of Christianity.



Tempera on panel, 53 x 35 cm. Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510). Capilla Real, Granada

Agony in the Garden

The Gethsemane experience, deep suffering in utter aloneness, endured only by surrendering to God's will, is here poignantly emphasized by the presence of the sleeping disciples.

fathers” who withdrew from society into the wilderness. The hermit is an established type in both Western and Eastern Christianity, and monastic institutions, even though striving for a common and closely knit way of life seemingly at the opposite pole from solitude, have often been linked with hermetical institutions and practices of one sort or another. Near our own day, the traditional Christian recognition of solitude was expressed by Cardinal Newman in his well-known saying, “The soul alone, face to face with God alone.”

Christians, then, have good grounds, both in

Scripture and in tradition, for questioning the prevailing emphasis on society. They can do this in some part simply by appealing to common sense. On the one hand, society is stubbornly and radically imperfect. It is, as Aristotle makes clear, grounded in military and economic necessity. It follows that the final standard governing its actions must be expediency. The principle that the individual is to be treated as an end, and never merely as a means to some other end, cannot possibly rule the life of any society. Every war shows this unmistakably. Economic developments frequently do so as well: the transition to a market economy in Russia, for example, a change vital to the health of Russian society, inevitably works hardship on individuals when inefficient state-owned enterprises are privatized and “streamlined.” On the other hand, we all recognize in our most serious moments that we must decide certain things—for example, how to conduct ourselves in an ambiguous situation or what to believe—all alone. If necessary, society must be defied.

Realizing the significance of solitude, however, depends finally on spiritual considerations. The spiritually crucial experience of guilt, for example, is always solitary; conscience does not tell me that *we* are guilty—at least, this is not its most forceful message—but that *I* am guilty. Correspondingly, the faith that I am justified by the Cross in spite of my guilt is maintained in solitude: I am justified by my own, and no one else’s, faith. And when I embark on the journey toward sanctification, I am singled out from all others by an unquenchable consciousness of moral responsibilities I alone can fulfill. Even the knowledge that I will die, so essential to my spiritual being, is knowledge of an intimately personal kind; I know that my death will be unshareable. Indeed, it is scarcely too much to suggest that solitude is the strait gate, spoken of in

In communal solitude one stands clear of alienating social constraints and is steadily attentive to other human beings and to God. Such solitude as this is a readiness for community; it is the solitude of Christ, of love on the Cross.

Matthew, through which all must pass in order to reach eternal life. “One man does not become blessed,” says Saint Augustine, “by the blessedness of another.”

Not that solitude is entirely safe. In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky presents a character in whom solitude nourished the traits of the mass man and the terrorist. Dostoevsky’s portrait suggests a distinction between two different kinds of solitude: the self-absorbed and the communal. The solitude of the underground man was a form of self-absorption. It meant being embroiled day and night in his own resentments and obsessions. In communal soli-

tude, however, one stands clear of alienating social constraints and is steadily attentive to other human beings and to God. Such solitude as this is a readiness for community; it is the solitude of Christ, of love on the Cross.

To speak of communal solitude is implicitly to mark out community as something different from society. Social

theorists today seem largely unaware of any such distinction, and this is why they pay so little attention to solitude. Society, we might say, is the outward order; community, the inward connection. Society is more or less impersonal, hierarchical, and instrumental; community is personal, egalitarian (in affirming the mystery and consequent incomparability of persons), and an end in itself. Strictly speaking, the kingdom of God is not a society but a community, whereas every historical collectivity is predominantly a society, containing at best ephemeral fragments of community.

As Ferdinand Tönnies—who may have originated the distinction—insisted, society (*Gesellschaft*) is alien and forbidding (“one goes into society as one goes into a strange country”), while community (*Gemeinschaft*) is good (“the expression ‘bad community’ violates the meaning of the word”). Writers who ignore the distinction must also ignore soli-

tude. Almost any society not in a manifest state of disintegration is spoken of as a community. If this were really the case, if every orderly society were a community, solitude would be little needed, for we are communal beings and in a full community one would realize simultaneously unabridged selfhood and perfect unity with others. In even the most harmonious societies, however, our communal nature is in some measure violated and we are forced to separate ourselves from others in order to protect ourselves from false relationships. We are forced into solitude for the sake of community.

From this standpoint we can understand the provisional truth inherent in individualism. Social theorists who neglect solitude logically enough condemn individualism; today, individualism is as rarely praised as is solitude. In our fallenness, however, individualism possesses a kind of truth. We have fallen into a condition of communal atomization, and the kind of solidarity we attain through society does not overcome that condition but conceals it. In doing this, it renders it irreparable. To condemn individualism is to blind ourselves to the need for solitude, and that, in turn, is to become willing captives of society.

Plainly, solitude is good only in the sense that it is necessary; it is not good in itself. It has been called “incommunicability”—a consciousness (it might be of guilt, for example, or of mortality) that is largely unshareable. The necessity of solitude arises from our fallenness. Solitude is a burden laid upon us by our having turned our backs on God. In doing this, we have turned our backs also on our fellow human beings and find ourselves largely deprived of true relationships. It is tragic that this has occurred; indeed, the fall into incommunicability is the primal catastrophe at the source of history. But nothing is gained by pretending that it never happened.

It is scarcely too much to say that in a society stressing as strongly as America does the importance of social participation, everything of supreme importance depends on there being the counterweight of communal solitude. If you have never, all alone, tried to define your major convictions, you cannot enter into truth-seeking conversation and thus are incapable of deep human relations. If you cannot be apart from others, you cannot engage in



Created by Ariel Agemian exclusively for the Confraternity of the Precious Blood

From the extremity of His solitude on the cross, Christ Jesus forgives His persecutors, baptizes the Earth with the blood of His cosmic love, and initiates Christian fellowship of the Spirit. On Golgotha—place of the (Adam's) skull—death is overcome and humanity is regenerated by the “last Adam.”

prayer and meditation and thus cannot enter into genuine relations with God. If you recoil from solitude, it may even be said, you are politically disabled; you necessarily lack the spirit of independence needed to stand for what is right in the public realm.

Yet, since the burden of solitude is the burden of personal responsibility and of mortality, we try continually to cast it off. We follow a route directly contrary to that of the desert fathers: We flee from the wilderness of solitude into society. Today, society beguiles us into doing this; through such devices as television, bureaucratic organization, and the conformist pressures arising from mass democracy, it tries ceaselessly to engross us in illusions of community. It may be that one of the ways in which God intends that Christians be the salt of the earth is by their serving as exemplars of Christly solitude. □

—Glenn Tinder