

POINT OF VIEW

THE occasional references in your pages to the eremitical life may strike some readers as unreal or escapist or, perhaps, for some, bitter reminders of an ideal impossible of achievement. They need not. It is true that few of us can imitate St Nicholas of Flüe in these days; and most of us have responsibilities which make it impossible, without a quite undesirable oddity of behaviour, to make unto ourselves hermitages beneath our domestic roof-trees. But there are in those very aspects of modern life which press hardly upon would-be seekers after solitude, elements out of which they can fashion a hermitage of the spirit, as truly as St Vincent de Paul found a cloister for his Daughters in the streets of Paris.

Spiritual or intellectual isolation; drudge-work; uncongenial associates; domestic difficulties, even dear domestic ties: if one feels hemmed in by them, cut off from the religious solitude one might seek if one were free, then make them your desert and your cell. The life led within those walls (precisely not made with hands, but by Providence, even, it may be, by one's own follies or sins) can be more intensely solitary than at Camaldoli or the Chartreuse. And living that life, perforce utterly *solus ad Solum*, while playing one's full part in the unseeing world, with charity, humility, and the rigorous exclusion of singularity, can demand as much of self-denial as the hermit's fasts and vigils—and it is vastly less romantic.

Seen steadily in this context, translated by each individual into the terms of the particular 'desert' he inhabits, eremitical spirituality has a genuine relevance to our times and an application much wider than to the few who are able to find or create enclaves of physical solitude in our excessively cenobitical civilisation.

"Tell me", Gentilotto instantly said: "Why did you never go to the Trappists?"

"Because I went to something worse, to something infinitely, terribly more ghastly. . . ."

Readers of *Hadrian the Seventh* will recognise the passage. We can all recognise its insight.

SOLITARIUS