

The Tradition of Solitude

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It is a curious fact that in the *Codex Juris Canonici*, the new canon law for the Latin Church promulgated in 1917, there is no mention whatever of hermits and recluses. In the official legislation for the 'religious' life today such persons are simply not considered or provided for. It is no reflection on the genius of the compiler of the *Codex*, Cardinal Gasparri, to consider this a regrettable omission. It merely reflects the existing state of affairs. Whereas in the Middle Ages hermits, anchorites, and anchoresses were a familiar part of the religious and social scenes, by the twentieth century (and much earlier) they were barely a memory, best known perhaps from the romantic pages of the Gothic novelists, from Mrs Radcliffe to Sir Walter Scott.

Today the 'solitary' life is once more being discussed and lived; and it seems safe to predict that the next revision of the canon law will have to take account of this fact. An interesting book could be written about hermits of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It would include such notable figures as Père Charles de Foucauld, the famous hermit of the Sahara, and Fra Jerome, T.O.S.F. (Monsignor John C. Hawes), whose 'Life', under the title *The Hermit of Cat Island*, has recently been published by Mr Peter F. Anson. Possibly de Foucauld was more hermit by force of circumstances than by intention, since his original hope and aim was to found a contemplative community in the desert. In this he failed; his disciples, the Little Brothers and the Little Sisters of Jesus, were not to come until after his death.

A similar disappointing destiny was that of William Sirr (better known as Father William) an Anglican religious, at first a member of the Society of the Divine Compassion, who spent his last years as a solitary, having failed to gather round him companions for the special vocation to which he felt called. In the end he had to write: 'I have not yet found a true monk!' (His story has been written by Fr Geoffrey Curtis, C.R., in *William of Glasshampton: Friar, Monk, Solitary*: S.P.C.K., 1947).

Of course, a modified form of the 'solitary' life is provided for in

certain religious orders, notably the Carthusians and the Camaldolese, and the Carmelites of the Discalced reform. The Charterhouse has had a certain influence on the Carmelite Order. It will be recalled that as a young man St John of the Cross wished to transfer from the Order of Carmel to the Charterhouse, and was only deterred by St Teresa and her plan for restoring the ancient discipline of solitude and silence among Carmelite friars and nuns.

Eremitical tendencies, and even direct Carthusian influence, are to be found in an order where one would least expect them: the Canons Regular of St Augustine (or Austin Canons). The origins of this order are obscure; the best account in English will be found in *The Origins of the Austin Canons and their Introduction into England* by J. C. Dickinson (London, S.P.C.K., 1950). In primitive times canons regular were simply that part of the clergy which lived in community under a superior (normally the bishop), observing the counsels of poverty (sometimes in a mitigated form), chastity, and obedience, in accordance with a rule written or approved for them by the bishop. As members of the clergy the canons were fully occupied in the cure of souls; so that when in course of time they became less directly dependent on the bishop, and more monastic in their organisation, it was natural that there should develop a certain 'tension' between the monastic and clerical aspects of canonical life.

In England many canonical houses were founded on the sites of former hermitages and seem to have retained something of the character of 'eremitical' communities. The first of these, probably, was the priory of Llanthony in Monmouthshire, built on a site formerly occupied by a hermit-knight named William.

When, in the nineteenth century, Joseph Leycester Lyne, alias Fr Ignatius of Llanthony, the pioneer of Anglican monasticism, built his abbey further up the same valley he unconsciously continued something of this eremitical tradition; for he too, like Père de Foucauld and Father William of Glasshampton, found it impossible to gather a stable community around him. In the present century, when the Llanthony property passed to the Caldey monks, who were unable to make a proper settlement there, the late Brother Joseph Woodford and one or two other brethren lived there as caretakers. Their life in that remote cloister, so close to the romantic ruins of Llanthony *Prima*, must have been one of blessed solitude indeed.

Another Austin priory, Nostell, began in much the same way as Llanthony. Bicknacre Priory, in Essex, 'originated in the gift of the

hermitagium de Wodeham to "brother Jordan canon and hermit"; at Bushmead, according to Leland, a hermit was venerated as the founder of the house; and Felley Priory began with a grant to 'brother Robert the hermit'.

Dom Noetinger, in his Introduction to Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection*, says that in the fourteenth century in England 'the cultivation of mystical theology appears to have met with scant encouragement in many of the older monasteries, pre-occupied as they were with temporal concerns; and the same applies to the Mendicant Orders which were very prosperous at this time and much involved in worldly business. Driven out everywhere else, mysticism found a refuge with the solitaries who, whether living as hermits in the open country, or as recluses shut into some cell adjoining a church, still remained numerous in fourteenth-century England. The treatises compiled either by the anchorities themselves, or for their use, form a unique group of writings, and constitute what may be termed the 'School of Fourteenth Century English Mysticism'.

To this school belonged Richard Rolle, the hermit of Hampole, and the Venerable Walter Hilton, canon of Thurgarton, author of *The Scale*. But Thurgarton was a Nottinghamshire house of some splendour, and Dom Noetinger remarks that nothing warrants the supposition that Hilton was himself a hermit or recluse, though he was evidently well acquainted with this manner of life and its spiritual needs.

Carthusian influence on the Austin Canons is most marked in the canons regular of the Windesheim Congregation. This congregation of canonical houses, to one of which, Mount St Agnes, belonged the Venerable Thomas à Kempis, spread swiftly throughout the Low Countries after a humble and quasi-eremital beginning at the rustic monastery of the Blessed John Ruysbroek and his few companions at Groenendaal, in the depths of the forest of Soignes, some miles outside Brussels.

The learned historian of the canonical order, Dom Van Ette, in his 'aperçu historique' *Les Chanoines réguliers de St Augustin* (Abbaye du Bouhay, Bressoux-Liège, 1953) says: 'A thing that surprises us in a congregation of canons regular is the establishment of the great enclosure in use, for example, among the Carthusians. This institution, which is out of place among religious of a canonical Order, was nevertheless cordially welcomed by the contemplatives of Windesheim. It was especially the Priory of Korsendonk that set itself to introduce this practice, and with such success that eighteen monasteries of men adopted it'.

The establishment of the great enclosure meant that the canons were strictly confined within the grounds of their estate, which were sufficiently extensive, no doubt, for purposes of exercise. But for an order which is as essentially pastoral as it is conventual and liturgical this was undoubtedly an aberration; and in the course of the seventeenth century the great enclosure was given up.

The heirs to this contemplative and faintly eremitical strain in canonical spirituality are today more especially the canons regular of the Lateran Congregation, with which that of Windesheim was eventually merged; perhaps even more so the canonesses who style themselves 'of the Lateran-Windesheim Congregation' and who can claim continuity also with the Austin canonesses of pre-Reformation England.

Carthusian influence on the Carmelite order has been of a different kind. It is rather a matter of a common sympathy, a common aspiration for the spiritual heights. There are marked resemblances between a Carthusian monastery and a Carmelite 'desert' convent; but the differences between the two orders are no less obvious. For instance, the rigid centralized government of the Carthusians and the more 'democratic' structure in Carmel; and, of course, the perpetual enclosure of the Carthusians (to which the weekly *spatiamentum* in common is the sole exception).

As Fr Benedict Zimmerman puts it (*Les Saints Déserts des Carmes Déchaussés* (Paris, 1927): 'Carthusians and Carmelites are both contemplatives for whom the divine office is the source of prayer, but, with the sons of St Bruno, for whom St Benedict is always their father, the liturgical note predominates, while with the Carmelites, steeped from their origin in the anachoretic life, and having a rule which enjoins unceasing meditation and prayer, there is a marked preference for solitary contemplation . . . But whatever are the spiritual nuances of the two orders, Carmel no less than the Charterhouse has for its purpose the facilitating of the life of contemplation'.

The 'desert' or 'eremitical' convents of the Carmelite order were the invention of the sixteenth century discalced Carmelite Thomas of Jesus, whose idea it was that each province of the order should have a house where the full contemplative life of the primitive Carmelites should be resumed, all apostolic activities being excluded. Although these 'desert' foundations were all based on an eremitical monastery of strict observance, a number of separate 'cells', or small residences on the Carthusian pattern were also provided, in order to allow the maximum possible solitude for those who sought it.

Desert monasteries of this kind were also instituted by the Carmelites of the Old Observance. After the era of the French Revolution and other upheavals, however, the desert houses had become extinct in both branches of the order. In recent years they have been revived among the discalced Carmelites, largely through the efforts of the late Père Jérôme de la Mère de Dieu, of the Flemish province (d. 1954). In 1956 an eremitical foundation was inaugurated by the Carmelites of the Old Observance at Wölfnitz, near Klagenfurt in Austria. At Wölfnitz, however, while the régime provides for the maximum of silence, manual labour, contemplative prayer, and solemn liturgical observance, there is no provision for separate hermitages.

The quest for solitude is part of man's unceasing quest for God. Today, in an age of unprecedented noise, disturbance, and restlessness, more people than ever long for silence and peace. It would be a poor state of affairs if the only way to find them was by entering a monastery. Those who dwell in monasteries are supposed to be specialists in silence and solitude; but religious orders exercise an influence which extends far beyond their convent walls. Especially is this true, perhaps of the 'mendicant' orders, with their triple structure: First Order (Friars: priests and laybrothers); Second Order (enclosed contemplative nuns); Third Order (layfolk—men and women, single or married, living 'in the world' and basing their spiritual life on the traditions of the order with which they are associated).

It is the vocation of the Carmelite, whether in the cloister or in the world, to be above all things a man of prayer, of deep interior life. It is this 'occupation with God' that is the principal theme of all Carmelite writings from the Rule of St Albert and *The Book of the First Monks*, down through the works of St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Avila, and St Mary Magdalen de Pazzi to their successors of our own day, St Teresa of Lisieux, Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity, Edith Stein, Père Jérôme, and Fr Titus Bransma.

This theme has been well developed in the special number of *Etudes Carmelitaines* published in 1947 under the title *Ma joie terrestre où donc es-tu?* One of its contents is an essay on the quest for solitude in the life and traditions of the Augustinian canonry and hospice of the Great St Bernard. This is followed by a luminous article by Père Bruno, O.C.D., on *La Chartreuse et le Carmel*. *Solitude Hindoue* is the subject of some inspiring pages by Lizelle Reymond (author of *My Life with a Brahmin Family*: Hutchinson, 1958, a golden book too little known); while Jacqueline Vincent, the story of whose extraordinary and heroic life

has since been written by Père Bruno (*Etudes Carmelitaines* 1960), pursues the same theme in accordance with our own traditions in her article *Solitude Chrétienne*.

'The Desert is the place of the highest Wisdom, the Wisdom of Love. Here, everything is supremely simple, pardon falls like a drop of dew from heaven; for the true solitary, even when he is suffering persecution for justice's sake, has mercy, just as he comforts those who weep. How could it be otherwise if he lives by the love of God alone, poor in spirit, clean of heart, gentle and unviolent?'

Reviews

THE CONSCIENCE OF ISRAEL Pre-Exilic Prophets and Prophecy, by Bruce Vawter, C.M.; Sheed and Ward; 22s. 6d.

The Hebrew prophets stand on one of the many islands of ignorance round which the broad stream of classical literary education has pursued, since the Renaissance, its complacent way. It is a safe enough guess that only a tiny minority of Catholics have read the prophetic books of the Bible, and a matter of common experience that, in the teaching of 'religious doctrine', the apologetic utility of prophecy has been insisted on to the exclusion of more intrinsic values.

Fr Vawter's book has many merits, but foremost among them is his evident determination to understand the prophets rather than to use them. His method is historical, his approach sympathetic and intelligent: the result, a piece of readable scholarship giving warmth as well as light. By encouraging us to see the prophets 'against the backdrop of the history in which they lived', Fr Vawter does more than rescue their human personalities from stained-glass immobility. He succeeds in communicating to us moderns, separated from the prophets by so many barriers of space, time and culture, the message which is more important than the men: the message embodied in a literature which is part of our birth-right. God's word, indeed, but man's too; a kingdom of the mind where we can and ought to be at home.

The book falls into three sections. The second and third parts discuss Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah (eighth century) and Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah (seventh century). In the first part, Fr Vawter examines the fact of Hebrew prophecy, set against comparable phenomena of the contemporary