

Learn To Be Alone

PHYSICAL solitude, exterior silence and real recollection are all morally necessary for anyone who wants to lead a contemplative life, but like everything else in creation they are nothing more than means to an end, and if we do not understand the end we will make a wrong use of the means.

We do not go into the desert to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good. But this is only a secondary end.

The one end that includes all others is the love of God.

How can people act and speak as if solitude were a matter of no importance in the interior life? Only those who have never experienced real solitude can glibly declare that it "makes no difference" and that only solitude of the heart really matters! One solitude must lead to the other!

However, the truest solitude is not something outside you, not an absence of men or of sound around you; it is an abyss opening up in the center of your own soul.

And this abyss of interior solitude is a hunger that will never be satisfied with any created thing.

The only way to find solitude is by hunger and thirst and sorrow and poverty and desire, and the man who has found solitude is empty, as if he had been emptied by death.

He has advanced beyond all horizons. There are no directions left in which he can travel. This is a country whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. You do not find it by traveling but by standing still.

Yet it is in this loneliness that the deepest activities begin. It is here that you discover act without motion, labor that is profound repose, vision in obscurity, and, beyond all desire, a fulfillment whose limits extend to infinity.

Although it is true that this solitude is everywhere, there is a mechanism for finding it that has some reference to actual space, to geography, to physical isolation from the towns and the cities of men.

There should be at least a room, or some corner where no one will find you and disturb you or notice you. You should be able to untether yourself from the world and set yourself free, loosing all the fine strings and strands of tension that bind you, by sight, by sound, by thought, to the presence of other men.

"But thou, when thou shalt pray, enter into thy cham-

ber, and having shut the door, pray to thy Father in secret. . . .”

Once you have found such a place, be content with it, and do not be disturbed if a good reason takes you out of it. Love it, and return to it as soon as you can, and do not be too quick to change it for another.

City churches are sometimes quiet and peaceful solitudes, caves of silence where a man can seek refuge from the intolerable arrogance of the business world. One can be more alone, sometimes, in church than in a room in one's own house. At home, one can always be routed out and disturbed (and one should not resent this, for love sometimes demands it). But in these quiet churches one remains nameless, undisturbed in the shadows, where there are only a few chance, anonymous strangers among the vigil lights, and the curious impersonal postures of the bad statues. The very tastelessness and shabbiness of some churches makes them greater solitudes, though churches should not be vulgar. Even if they are, as long as they are dark it makes little difference.

Let there always be quiet, dark churches in which men can take refuge. Places where they can kneel in silence. Houses of God, filled with His silent presence. There, even when they do not know how to pray, at least they can be still and breathe easily. Let there be a place somewhere in which you can breathe naturally, quietly, and not have to take your breath in continuous short gasps. A place where your mind can be idle, and

forget its concerns, descend into silence, and worship the Father in secret.

There can be no contemplation where there is no secret.

We have said that the solitude that is important to a contemplative is, above all, an interior and spiritual thing. We have admitted that it is possible to live in deep and peaceful interior solitude even in the midst of the world and its confusion. But this truth is sometimes abused in religion. There are men dedicated to God whose lives are full of restlessness and who have no real desire to be alone. They admit that exterior solitude is good, in theory, but they insist that it is far better to preserve interior solitude while living in the midst of others. In practice, their lives are devoured by activities and strangled with attachments. Interior solitude is impossible for them. They fear it. They do everything they can to escape it. What is worse, they try to draw everyone else into activities as senseless and as devouring as their own. They are great promoters of useless work. They love to organize meetings and banquets and conferences and lectures. They print circulars, write letters, talk for hours on the telephone in order that they may gather a hundred people together in a large room where they will all fill the air with smoke and make a great deal of noise and roar at one another and clap their hands and stagger home at last patting one another on the back with the assurance that they have all done great things to spread the Kingdom of God.

You will never find interior solitude unless you make some conscious effort to deliver yourself from the desires and the cares and the attachments of an existence in time and in the world.

Do everything you can to avoid the noise and the business of men. Keep as far away as you can from the places where they gather to cheat and insult one another, to exploit one another, to laugh at one another, or to mock one another with their false gestures of friendship. Be glad if you can keep beyond the reach of their radios. Do not bother with their unearthly songs. Do not read their advertisements.

The contemplative life certainly does not demand a self-righteous contempt for the habits and diversions of ordinary people. But nevertheless, no man who seeks liberation and light in solitude, no man who seeks spiritual freedom, can afford to yield passively to all the appeals of a society of salesmen, advertisers and consumers. There is no doubt that life cannot be lived on a human level without certain legitimate pleasures. But to say that all the pleasures which offer themselves to us as necessities are now "legitimate" is quite another story.

A natural pleasure is one thing; an unnatural pleasure, forced upon the satiated mind by the importunity of a salesman is quite another.

It should be accepted as a most elementary human and moral truth that no man can live a fully sane and decent life unless he is able to say "no" on occasion to his natural bodily appetites. No man who simply eats and drinks whenever he feels like eating and drinking, who smokes whenever he feels the urge to light a cigarette, who gratifies his curiosity and sensuality whenever they are stimulated, can consider himself a free person. He has renounced his spiritual freedom and become the servant of bodily impulse. Therefore his mind and his will are not fully his own. They are under the power of his appetites. And through the medium of his appetites, they are under the control of those who gratify his appetites. Just because he can buy one brand of whisky rather than another, this man deludes himself that he is making a choice; but the fact is that he is a devout servant of a tyrannical ritual. He must reverently buy the bottle, take it home, unwrap it, pour it out for his friends, watch TV, "feel good," talk his silly uninhibited head off, get angry, shout, fight and go to bed in disgust with himself and the world. This becomes a kind of religious compulsion without which he cannot convince himself that he is really alive, really "fulfilling his personality." He is not "sinning" but simply makes an ass of himself, deluding himself that he is real when his com-

where the radio makes you deaf with spurious news and where the food destroys your life and the sentiments of those around you poison your heart with boredom, do not be impatient, but accept it as the love of God and as a seed of solitude planted in your soul. If you are appalled by those things, you will keep your appetite for the healing silence of recollection. But meanwhile—keep your sense of compassion for the men who have forgotten the very concept of solitude. You, at least, know that it exists, and that it is the source of peace and joy. You can still hope for such joy. They do not even hope for it any more.

If you seek escape for its own sake and run away from the world only because it is (as it must be) intensely unpleasant, you will not find peace and you will not find solitude. If you seek solitude merely because it is what you prefer, you will never escape from the world and its selfishness; you will never have the interior freedom that will keep you really alone.

ONE vitally important aspect of solitude is its intimate dependence on chastity. The virtue of chastity is not the complete renunciation of all sex, but simply the right use of sex. This means, according to most of the great religious traditions of the world, the restriction of all sex to married life, and, within the married state, to certain ordinate norms.

Nowhere is self-denial more important than in the

area of sex, because this is the most difficult of all natural appetites to control and one whose undisciplined gratification completely blinds the human spirit to all interior light.

Sex is by no means to be regarded as an evil. It is a natural good, willed by God, and entering into the mystery of God's love and God's mercy toward men. But though sex may not be evil in itself, inordinate attachment to sexual pleasure, especially outside of marriage, is one of man's most frequent and pitiable weaknesses.

Indeed, it is so common that most people today simply believe that sex cannot be fully controlled—that it is not really possible for a normal human being to abstain from it completely. Hence they assume that one should simply resign himself to the inevitable and cease worrying about it.

One must certainly agree that pathological guilt about sex is no help at all in helping men to get control of passion. However, self-control is not only desirable but altogether possible and it is essential for the contemplative life. It demands considerable effort, watchfulness, patience, humility and trust in Divine grace. But the very struggle for chastity teaches us to rely on a spiritual power higher than our own nature, and this is an indispensable preparation for interior prayer. Furthermore, chastity is not possible without ascetic self-sacrifice in many other areas. It demands a certain amount of fasting, it requires a very temperate and well-ordered life,

modesty, restraint of curiosity, moderation of one's aggressivity, and many other virtues. *yes - just a boy*

Perfect chastity establishes one in a state of spiritual solitude, peace, tranquillity, clarity, gentleness and joy in which one is fully disposed for meditation and contemplative prayer.