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REDWOODS MONASTERY NEWSLETTER Fall 2006

Solitude of the Heart

Sr. Kathy DeVico

Solitude is a primary value in monastic life. This has always been an evident reality. Yet, this spiritual and human value is not just for monks and contemplatives. Fr. Michael Casey, a monk of Tarrawarra Abbey in Australia, and a scholar of monasticism, notes that the human species is such that we have a need for both community and solitude. He writes: “If there is not space and time for attention to inward realities, the result will be not only increasing superficiality, but a profound feeling of alienation from one’s nature” (The Undivided Heart, p.136). Solitude is an essential need of the soul, one which leads us to our true nature and reveals the creative depths of our lives.



in a way that does not oppress the human spirit but enlarges and expands it. Interior solitude enables us to hear the voice of God. It awakens us to the grace present in even the most demanding situations. For Christian monasticism, monastic solitude is inspired by Jesus’ withdrawal into the desert after his baptism and also by his ministry where he regularly withdraws to a lonely place to pray. There Jesus is nourished and re-unites himself more intimately with his ‘Abba’ (his Father) whose will he has come to fulfill. The gospels tell us that Jesus’ withdrawal into solitude to pray brings him back to the core of his ministry: bringing God’s love to anyone who will hear and receive him.

Monastic Enclosure

In a monastery, we set aside physical space and agree to certain guidelines which make up the ‘observance’ of monastic solitude. These guidelines concern who enters the ‘enclosure,’ when the sisters leave the ‘enclosure,’ times for silence and speaking, designated places of silence, use of media, phones, and the internet. How one lives in relation to these guidelines constitutes one’s ‘observance’ of monastic solitude.

The community structures and agreements governing them are a means to cultivate solitude of the heart; they are not ends and thus we cannot be rigid or Pharasaic as we apply them to daily circumstances. These means are there to help us grow, not hinder us in becoming free persons in Christ. Taking Jesus as our pattern, we

An Abbess from one of our Cistercian monasteries in Japan said at our Order’s General Chapter (October, 2005): “Deep solitude gently creates sympathy with the other person’s heart...The deeper the solitude the more it can touch the other person’s heart and become one with the other person...Solitude and communication ought to be recognized as exactly the same thing.” These statements are profound and we might sense that while we don’t totally grasp what they mean we are still being drawn to the truth and reality they contain.

The dimension of solitude opens and softens the heart, the ears and the eyes to behold the face of God in all persons and in all things. Solitude of the heart is about communion, becoming one with God, ourselves, humanity, and the created world. Its fruit is interiority, a capacity to carry difficulties, challenges, and suffering

In addition to this new building construction, improvements to the landscape include among other things better pathways and access to the church compliant with ADA requirements. Another part of the long-range plan is the remodel and expansion of the Library to better house the archives and books so integral to monastic life. All this is to be accomplished in a way that best maintains the simple character of the Monastery complex.

Through generous gifts from benefactors, as well as grants from the Cistercian Order and the National Religious Retirement Office, funds have been made available to build the Senior Wing and to install a new heating system for the main Monastery complex. It is hoped to begin construction by the end of summer.

In June, the Community placed the memorial stone on the grave of the founding Abbess, Myriam Dardenne. A river rock, it contains a brass plaque with her name and dates of her birth and death. It is both beautiful and simple—a reminder of her presence in our midst.

The community is composed of nine nuns, including one novice and one temporary professed, as well as Fr. Maurice Flood, Chaplain. We celebrated Sr. Godelieve’s 83rd birthday this June, so our community spans almost

50 years in age. A new postulant will join us on the Feast of the Assumption, August 15.

Our Guesthouse continues to provide respite for those who come on retreat. The honey business is expanding; and it is now possible to order honey directly from our website: www.redwoodsabbey.org.

We thank you for your generous support which has allowed us to keep up the ongoing maintenance of the Monastery as well as expand our honey business.

We assure you of our continued prayers of gratitude for your continued friendship.



see how often he was being judged or condemned by religious leaders for breaking the laws and traditions governing the Sabbath, ritual purity and so on. Jesus would not allow the humanity of persons to be hurt or compromised by these laws and customs. 'No, the Son of Man is master even of the Sabbath' [Mk.2:28].

'Observance' is important as a way to structure our living and to remind us of that place in the heart which brings our lives back to center, where God is the focus and the ground of our being. Yet still there is always the danger of making these means the end purpose of our lives.

The more we root ourselves in the 'solitude of the heart' the less we become rigid and controlling. The more we root ourselves in the 'solitude of the heart' the more we become open and supple to the Spirit's guidance, to the action of grace in our lives.

Alone With Ourselves

What is 'solitude of the heart'? And why is it so important not only for monks but for everyone? In the first place interior solitude teaches us how 'to be with ourselves.' In the sixth century we have a remarkable dialogue between Gregory the Great and a brother monk named Peter about St. Benedict, one of the founders of western monasticism. Gregory says of St. Benedict "he lived alone with himself" (Dialogues, Book II: Saint Benedict, trans. by Myra L. Uhlfelder, p. 9). Peter then says to Gregory "I do not understand very clearly the meaning of 'lived with himself'" (p.9).

I am sure we can all identify with Peter's confusion! Here is an excerpt of Gregory's reply to Peter: "For whenever we are led too far outside ourselves through the motion of thought, we are ourselves but we are not with ourselves since we lose sight of ourselves and stray over other paths" (p.9). The motion of thought pulls us away from the silent inviolate place of the heart where we find and are found by the Divine Presence.

When we sit in silence for five minutes and simply observe our thoughts, we see the truth of what Gregory is saying. The motion of thought leads, pulls, pushes us to the point where we indeed 'lose sight of ourselves,' where we stray far away from our true center, that place in our heart where we know ourselves to be in God and God in us. The Japanese Abbess who I quoted above also remarked that "solitude is more about awareness than concentration within myself."

"solitude is more about awareness than concentration within myself"

In solitude we become aware that we are being acted upon by events in our outer lives and by realities within our own heart's depths. This awareness is precious because we are given knowledge about our selves; we see that we are not quiet inside, that we are disturbed, hurt, angry, anxious, or fearful. Once we have this awareness, possibilities open within: healing, insight, understanding, choices of how to move forward. Awareness is central in helping us to find again our connection to our true self and God.

As we 'return to ourselves' we gain a new perspective on what has been affecting us, and we are better able to experience the Spirit's presence transforming us, helping us to receive the grace that is always there in every event. We never leave the presence of God; too much of our lives are lived in a mindless state, where we lack the awareness that "in God we move, live and have our being." Silence and solitude cultivate this sensitivity and awareness.

Solitude Is Not Isolation

In Psalm 45 (46) the following poetic phrase touches the place of solitude in us: "Be still and know that I am God." We can use these words as a mantra, as a prayer to lead us to the secret room of the heart where we are to shut the door and abide in the silent mystery of Love, which is the presence of God. 'Be still' — this stillness leads beyond and beneath the noise of everyday life, it roots us in the silence of God.

We need to realize that there is more in us than all the emotional and intellectual content that act upon us each day. This activity is only a part of our reality. God is greater than it all, while still being intimately bound up with all that is woven into our human lives of daily struggles and joys.

Solitude reveals to us the true meaning of our lives, which is a life inseparable from the Divine life. As we grow stronger in this realization we come to see how it affects our relationships. The deeper the solitude, the closer and more united we are to others, able to feel with the other, to suffer with those who suffer, to rejoice with those who rejoice. This is a fruit of interior solitude.

When our heart is not quiet or at peace, it becomes difficult to respond with compassion to another's situation because we are so caught up in our own concerns. But the presence of Christ in our humanity

is there to help us re-find ourselves. Solitude is never isolation; it goes hand in hand with true relationship. 'Be still', 'Do not be afraid'—the Divine voice can help us re-center, re-root ourselves in that silent still place of the heart. It is remarkable how moments of solitude help change our perceptions of others and of difficult situations.

We need to take time for solitude and silence, for it takes time to let go of our worries and concerns, to wind down from a busy day, to settle down into the silence of the heart. While working on this reflection, I received a 'Desert Saying' from a friend of Redwoods Monastery, Martine Beaudoin. This saying comes from the solitude of her heart. She writes: "Abba Hesybios said, The movement of God enters our time in the moment of stillness."

With this silent movement of God within us we are given the grace to be compassionate as God is compassionate, to see with the eyes of God. Here is the presence of Love, Love becoming incarnate in us. This is the moment of our renewal and gift to others.

Conclusion

In a beautiful book entitled Cloisters of Europe, the authors use an expression 'the language of silence' (Daniel Faure and Veronique Rouchon Mouilleron, p.16). We learn about the language of silence in the solitude of the heart.

A monastery is so arranged that its buildings and grounds along with nature and the animal kingdom all form part of this language. And then there we are: human beings! We also contribute to this language of silence. Both our speech and our non-verbal movements participate in this language.

When we notice we are being overwhelmed by life's events, there is a deeper silence, which is the silence of God all around us and within us, to help us find our bearings once again. To paraphrase the poet, W.H. Auden, 'In the solitude of the heart, there the healing fountain starts.' This gift, this grace awaits us now and always.

Community Reflections on Solitude and Nature

1) Morning rays of Light that peer through our stately redwoods. (Sr. Ann-Marie)

2) Among beauty's graces of our life at Redwoods Monastery for me are the callings of the Owl and doves, and the talking of the ravens. They delight my soul in praise. And some days on my walk in the 'second field' the stillness just falls upon me: God is present and I give thanks. (Sr. Veronique)

3) What makes this monastery a house of prayer, a fountain of life is the presence of the Living Christ, that invites us each day to enter into this mystery of His love; to transform our lives not only for our sake but for the sake of humanity...Oh, Love that comes to rescue what belongs to you. (Sr. Karen)

4) The fauna and flora of nature invites my spirit to outer and inner silence, awakening my soul to the awe and wonder of the loving Creator; the deep harmony in Creation, in storms and in fair weather, resonates deep within my being, opening myself to the Mystery of God. (Sr. Annette)

5) Redwoods: silence, space, light. They express the mystery of depth and lead us to freedom. Freedom in ourselves. Depth of our lives. Mystery of Communion with God, with Creation, with each one. (Sr. Claire)

6) Beauty...ever-new manifestation of the eternal God! Wherever I guide my steps around this place, I discover you in a rich variety of ways: You awaken my senses and speak to me in a direct way; My eyes perceive the dance of hummingbirds and the thrill of the wind shaking the leaves of our pear trees; With my ears I catch the sound of the flowing river and the song of lovely birds; When my hands touch the rough bark of the redwoods trees, I hold my breath before such majesty, and in the freshness of morning, I smell the fragrance of roses everywhere. But, when at sunset all is still, the whole of creation enters my soul. And I ponder its deeper meaning and give THANKS. (Sr. Godelieve)

COMMUNITY NEWS

Of major import this year is the work of implementing the Master Plan for the monastery's buildings and grounds that was formulated in 2005.

A Capital Campaign Committee was formed and the implementation of Phase I has begun. The Master Plan includes improvements to the 40 year-old infrastructure, plus construction of a new Senior Wing to include facilities for "in-house" care and easy access to the main building.