

ON THE DANGERS OF THE SOLITARY LIFE

BY

ST BASIL THE GREAT AND ST JOHN CLIMACUS

I. ST BASIL (*Regulae Fusius Tractatae*, Interrogatio 7).

AM convinced that a life lived together with others is much more profitable than the life of a solitary. In the first place, we are none of us self-sufficient as regards the needs of the body, but depend on each other for its necessities. For just as the foot possesses one capacity but not another, and cannot exercise its own office without the help of the other members of the body, nor supply what it lacks out of its own resources—so also in the solitary life even what we have becomes useless, because what we lack becomes unobtainable. For God the Creator has ordained that we should have need of one another as it is written, therefore we are closely linked to each other.

But apart from that, the love of Christ itself does not suffer that each of us should look only to himself. Charity, as St Paul says, seeketh not its own. The eremitical life, however, aims precisely at this, that everyone should look after his own needs. This, however, clearly militates against the law of charity which the Apostle himself fulfilled, who did not seek his own profit, but the salvation of many.

Moreover, if a person lives by himself he does not easily recognise his own faults, since he has nobody to reprove and correct him in all humility and meekness. But correction is necessary, for even if reproach comes from an enemy it often has a salutary effect on a well-disposed person—how much more will the correction of one who truly loves us do much to cure sin! But it is very difficult, indeed, to find such a one in the life of solitude, unless one had already been associated with him before. And so the saying of the Wise Man will find application: 'Woe to him that is alone: for, when he falleth, he hath none to lift him up'. (*Ecclesiastes* 4, 10).

Now if we, who have been received into the hope of our calling, are all one body with Christ as its head, each one of us is a member of the other only if we are joined together in the harmony of the body in the Holy Ghost. On the other hand, if each one of us chooses solitude and does not serve the common good according to the will of God, but indulges his own desire for self-sufficiency, how can we, divided and disjoined, preserve the state of being members of each other in the obedience to our Head, which is Christ? For then we cannot rejoice with him who is honoured, nor sympathise with him

who suffers, since we are ignorant of the state of our neighbour. Moreover, how can one show humility if there is no one in whose regard he can practise it? How pity, if one is cut off from communion with others? How can one exercise patience if no one opposes one's own will? Therefore the fighting ring, the way of progress and the constant exercise of perfection is the common life of the brethren.

II. ST JOHN CLIMACUS (*Scala Paradisi*, Gradus 27)

There are such as approach this port, or rather this sea, or, perhaps even better, this abyss, of the solitary life, because of the unruliness of their tongue and the weakness of their flesh. Others because they are immoderately addicted to wrath and cannot contain themselves when they, miserable beggars, are living with others; they want to sail through life under their own rather than under anyone else's command. Yet others choose this life because they cannot abstain from material things if they live among them; others still, that they may become the more zealous by living alone; others that they may perform secret penances; lastly there are those who seek admiration by such a life. And then there are those—if haply, when the Son of Man cometh, he shall find such true hermits on earth—who choose this holy solitude because of its spiritual delights and their thirst for the love of God and its sweetness, though they will not do so until they have rid themselves of all sloth and listlessness.

Let no one, therefore, dare to follow the eremitical life if he is still subject to wrath and conceit, to hypocrisy and remembrance of injuries, for he will only reap madness. Only if someone is pure of these, he may examine whether such a life is suitable for him. The signs of those who are justified in approaching the solitary life are these: an unperturbed mind, a purified understanding, enraptured love of the Lord, constant memory of eternal punishments and death, unquenchable thirst for prayer, unflagging watchfulness, extinction of all sexual desires and other passions, death to the world, sound theological foundations, discretion, the gift of tears, silence, and other, similar things which most men abhor. . . .

For he who lives as a hermit has to contend against weariness (*accidie*), and only too frequently is he its dupe, because all his time of prayer and contemplation is taken up with fighting against it. Therefore I say that those who truly understand the science of solitude are few. He who does not yet know God intimately is unfit for the eremitical life and subject to many dangers. Solitude chokes the inexperienced; for not knowing the sweetness of God they waste their time, as if imprisoned, in disgust and distractions. Hence the poor religious who is subject to another is better than a distracted hermit.

And even if one has begun the solitary life with sufficient justification, but fails to perceive its fruits every day, one either does not practise this life as it should be, or has been deluded by conceit. For the solitary life means unremitting service of God; let the memory of Jesus be constantly united to your breath and you shall see its fruitfulness.

Therefore you should greatly fear the solitary life, for nothing is more apt to lead to listlessness and disgust. To sum up: no one should put his hand to building the tower of the solitary life unless he has first sat down and counted, in prayer, whether he has the necessary qualities to carry it through; else, after having laid the foundation, he will become a laughing stock to his enemies and a snare to others. For one must beware of the sweetness it seems to promise, lest it should be caused by cruel physicians, or rather by subtle deceivers. . .

III. *Legislation of the Church.* (Council in Trullo, A.D. 692, Canon 41.)

Those who wish to live as anchorites in towns or villages, and to separate themselves, must first enter a monastery and be trained in the eremitical life. They must be subject to the Superior of the monastery for the space of three years in the fear of God, and practise obedience in all things, as is meet. In this way they proclaim their free choice of such a life, and to make sure that they embrace it with their whole heart of their own will, they must be examined by the superior of this place. Then they must conduct themselves manfully outside the enclosure for another year, so that their character may become the more manifest. For in this way they will prove that they pursue not vainglory, but seek the peace of solitude for its own beauty and goodness. After they have been trained all this time, if they persevere in the same choice, they may enclose themselves; and then they may no longer leave their dwelling place when they like, except if they are compelled to do so for the common good or for another urgent necessity entailing danger of death, and even then only with the blessing of the local bishop.

Translated by H. C. GRAEF.

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