

# *Poustinia*

Christian Spirituality of the East  
for Western Man

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# I

## Silence . . . Desert . . . Prayer

Dan Herr, publisher of the *Critic*, once said, "Retreats are out . . . deserts are in!" Perhaps I am being presumptuous in thinking that his gentle little arrow was partially directed at me. For I haven't noticed too many other people on the North American continent writing about deserts or going to them.

For the last few years I have been talking and writing a great deal about silence, solitude, and deserts, and I will continue to write about them because I think they are vitally important to our growing, changing, technological, urban civilization. It is obvious that humanity is facing many problems, will have to face many more, and that these problems are deeply disturbing the souls of all men. It is just as certain that we cannot, must not, reject the new, strange, adventuresome, frightening world that is opening before us . . . that is already with us. Especially we Christians cannot do this because Christ has inserted himself into this world and we are his people, his body, and so we belong as he does to this world of IBM machines, to this world of cybernetics, that daily bring vaster problems before our minds, hearts and souls. For science moves faster and faster, so much faster than the men of today—or even the

men of tomorrow—are able to apprehend, comprehend or assimilate.

Science continues to destroy, in its own relentless fashion, what might be called false myths, superstitions, and accretions that surround not only the Christian religion but even God himself, accretions which cling to the Church's robes. In one sense, science is doing a good job, and we should welcome its findings, always, however, appraising such findings in the light of the true revelation of the risen Christ.

This appraisal is so necessary especially in the age in which we live. So many people are going to seek Christ in so many places. He predicted as much: "Or, if people should tell you, 'Look, he's out in the desert!'—don't go there; or if they say, 'Look, he is hiding here!'—don't believe it" (Matt 24:26). The Fathers of the Church, the bishops, have been given graces by the Holy Spirit to make true appraisals. We must be watchful here.

Many "top secret" and as yet unpublicized findings of science have the power of making a robot out of man. It can, we are told, even change man himself genetically, or brainwash him into submission. At the same time, the world of science, together with the spiritual renewal, invite man (the center of creation) to an *experience* of a "liberty of the children of God" seldom known before.

Now, man can truly have an encounter with reality and rise to the very source—to the Origin that has no origin. For the mystery of men in the midst of the world, nature, technology, and urbanization is intrinsically a *Divine Mystery*. But it is still on the cross that God reveals himself to this scientific, technological civilization of ours. As usual, he is close and distant. As usual, he reveals himself through what is not himself, so that even modern man

can recognize the fullness of truth—the image of God manifested in the world and its temporality.

But it is to be understood that this Mystery, first of all, is not found in the world as such. It is found and seized upon in the hearts of the men who seek him, without denying his existence. It is because man is fundamentally spirit—open to the absolute of the Divine—that he is always dissatisfied, in one manner or another, with all created reality. Nature is not divine. It is only a sign of God, a cry toward God.

It seems strange to say, but what can help modern man find the answers to his own mystery and the mystery of him in whose image he is created, is *silence, solitude—in a word, the desert*. Modern man needs these things more than the hermits of old.

If we are to witness to Christ in today's marketplaces, where there are constant demands on our whole person, we need silence. If we are to be always available, not only physically, but by empathy, sympathy, friendship, understanding and boundless *caritas*, we need silence. To be able to give joyous, unflagging hospitality, not only of house and food, but of mind, heart, body and soul, we need silence.

True silence is the search of man for God.

True silence is a suspension bridge that a soul in love with God builds to cross the dark, frightening gullies of its own mind, the strange chasms of temptation, the depthless precipices of its own fears that impede its way to God.

True silence is the speech of lovers. For only love knows its beauty, completeness, and utter joy. True silence is a garden enclosed, where alone the soul can meet its God. It is a sealed fountain that he alone can unseal to slacken the soul's infinite thirst for him.

True silence is a key to the immense and flaming heart of God. It is the beginning of a divine courtship that will end only in the immense, creative, fruitful, loving silence of final union with the Beloved.

Yes, such silence is holy, a prayer beyond all prayers, leading to the final prayer of constant presence of God, to the heights of contemplation, when the soul, finally at peace, lives by the will of him whom she loves totally, utterly, and completely.

This silence, then, will break forth in a charity that overflows in the service of the neighbor without counting the cost. It will witness to Christ anywhere, always. Availability will become delightful and easy, for in each person the soul will see the face of her Love. Hospitality will be deep and real, for a silent heart is a loving heart, and a loving heart is a hospice to the world.

This silence is not the exclusive prerogative of monasteries or convents. This simple, prayerful silence is everybody's silence—or if it isn't, it should be. It belongs to every Christian who loves God, to every Jew who has heard in his heart the echoes of God's voice in his prophets, to everyone whose soul has risen in search of truth, in search of God. For where noise is—inward noise and confusion—there God is not!

Deserts, silence, solitudes are *not necessarily places but states of mind and heart*. These deserts can be found in the midst of the city, and in the every day of our lives. We need only to look for them and realize our tremendous need for them. They will be small solitudes, little deserts, tiny pools of silence, but the experience they will bring, if we are disposed to enter them, may be as exultant and as holy as all the deserts of the world, even the one God him-

self entered. For it is God who makes solitude, deserts, and silences holy.

Consider the solitude of walking from the subway train or bus to your home in the evening, when the streets are quieter and there are few passersby. Consider the solitude that greets you when you enter your room to change your office or working clothes to more comfortable, homey ones. Consider the solitude of a housewife, alone in her kitchen, sitting down for a cup of coffee before beginning the work of the day. Think of the solitudes afforded by such humble tasks as housecleaning, ironing, sewing.

One of the first steps toward solitude is a departure. Were you to depart to a real desert, you might take a plane, train or car to get there. But we're blind to the "little departures" that fill our days. These "little solitudes" are often right behind a door which we can open, or in a little corner where we can stop to look at a tree that somehow survived the snow and dust of a city street. There is the solitude of a car in which we return from work, riding bumper to bumper on a crowded highway. This too can be a "point of departure" to a desert, silence, solitude.

But our hearts, minds, and souls must be attuned, desirous, aware of these moments of solitude that God gives us. To be so attuned we must lose our superstition of time. God laughs at time, for if our souls are open to him, available to him, he can invite them, change them, lift them, transform them in *one instant!* He can say to someone driving that car bumper to bumper, "I will lead you into solitude and there I shall speak to your heart" (Hos 2:14).

There is no solitude without silence. True, silence is sometimes the absence of speech—but it is always the act of listening. The mere absence of noise (which is empty

of our listening to the voice of God) is not silence. A day filled with noise and voices can be a day of silence, if the noises become for us the echo of the presence of God, if the voices are, for us, messages and solicitations of God. When we speak of ourselves and are filled with ourselves, we leave silence behind. When we repeat the intimate words of God that he has left within us, our silence remains intact.

Silence is truth in charity. It answers him who asks. But it must give only words filled with light. Silence, like everything else, either makes us give ourselves, or it becomes miserliness and avarice, in which we keep ourselves to ourselves. The scripture says that we will have to give an account for every word. Perhaps we may also have to render an account for the words that we have not spoken and should have!

Deserts, silence, solitude. For a soul that realizes the tremendous need of all three, opportunities present themselves in the midst of the congested trappings of all the world's immense cities.

But how, really, can one achieve such solitude? *By standing still!* Stand still, and allow the strange, deadly restlessness of our tragic age to fall away like the worn-out, dusty cloak that it is—a cloak that was once considered beautiful. The restlessness was considered the magic carpet to tomorrow, but now in reality we see it for what it is: a running away from oneself, a turning from that journey inward that all men must undertake to meet God dwelling within the depths of their souls.

*Stand still*, and look deep into the motivations of life. Are they such that true foundations of sanctity can be built on them? For truly man has been born to be a saint—a lover of Love who died for us! There is but one

tragedy: not to be a saint. If these motivations of life are not such that they can be true foundations for sanctity, then the soul must start all over again and find other motivations. It can be done. It must be done. It is never too late to begin again.

*Stand still*, and lifting your hearts and hands to God, pray that the mighty wind of his Holy Spirit may clear all the cobwebs of fears, selfishness, greed, narrow-heartedness away from the soul: that his tongues of flame may descend to give courage to begin again.

All this standing still can be done in the midst of the outward noise of daily living and the duties of state in life. For it will bring order into the soul, God's order, and God's order will bring tranquillity, his own tranquillity. And it will bring silence.

It will bring the silence of a lover listening with all his being to the heartbeats of his beloved. The silence of a bride, who in her utter joy listens to her heart reechoing every word of the beloved. The silence of a mother, so deep, so inward, that in it she listens with her whole being to the voice of her children playing in a nearby yard, cognizant without effort, of the slightest change in each voice. Hers is a listening silence which takes place while she competently, efficiently and lovingly attends to her daily duties.

This silence will come and take possession also of lover, bride, mother, worker, nurse, apostle, priest, nun—if only the face of their soul, in the midst of their daily occupations, is turned to God.

At first such silences will be few and far between. But if nourished with a life of liturgical prayer, mental prayer, with the sacramental life of the Church, slowly, slowly, like the seedling of a mighty tree, silence will grow and

come to dwell in a soul more and more often. Then suddenly, it will come to stay one day.

Then the soul will turn itself to its Beloved. Walking softly on this incandescent path of silence, he will come. His coming—once experienced—will make silence, henceforth, a precious thing. Now it will deepen, and, encompassing the whole man, will make man its own.

Yet, strangely enough, with silence dwelling constantly in the soul—a Mary of Magdala at the feet of Christ—speech will come more easily to people whose souls are completely recollected—in that silence—in the Lord. Speech and works too. They will move among men gently, softly, kindly. Love will shine in their every gesture, in their every word. There will always be time to do something more for someone, somewhere.

Nourished by the waters of silence, *caritas* will begin to sing its song of love, making all men and women literally spend themselves for others—at home, abroad, in any and every state of life, on all streets and marketplaces of the world. And lo! Behold. Their strength—even as their youth—will be renewed as an eagle's!

Slowly, imperceptibly, the world roundabout them will change. For the silence within them will become part of God's loving, mighty, creative, fruitful silence. His voice will be heard through them. His face will be seen in theirs! And the light of it will become a light to their neighbor's feet.

Thus silence will bring peace to all. The prayer of silence will be heard in our land far and wide. And the Beloved will once more come to dwell among men, for his vineyard—the world—will be restored to him. Yes, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

By the infinite grace of God, men and women of the

70's, having left behind them the "death of God," the question of their "relevance or irrelevance," have now turned their faces to prayer. Perhaps not only their faces, but their minds and hearts and souls as well. The hungry heart of man could not stand the terrible desert that surrounded it. It had to renew its contact with God—it had to begin to pray again.

So, prayer is "in." Families talk about it. Young people discuss it. Contemplative religious argue about it. All religious orders are trying to understand it. Books that teach about prayer in a variety of forms are best-sellers. People pilgrim to find someone who can teach them how to pray. People search for prayer houses, solitude, aloneness where they feel they can really pray. Yes, God's goodness once again reveals itself in this hunger for prayer and in this hunger for communication with him. Once again we realize that "without him we can do nothing."

But there is a danger here similar to the one discussed above. Just as people fail to distinguish between silence and physical solitude, so there is a danger not to distinguish between prayer and solitude. These are two different aspects of the spiritual life. Prayer, of course, is the life of every Christian. Without prayer, without contact with God, this life dies. Solitude, on the other hand, is a special vocation; it is for the few, not the many. Yet, today, so many are thinking of prayer houses and little places of physical solitude. So many priests, sisters, brothers, whose vocation is really an active one, suddenly have decided that they can enter the solitude of a Carthusian monk. In the majority of cases, this is just a daydream, a romantic temptation of the spiritual life. Frankly, it is an escape from the tensions that are holding priests, nuns, families, and youth in a sort of unrelenting grasp these days. *Accept,*

*first, the solitude of your own heart.* Prayer, like silence, is a matter of a journey inward, as are all pilgrimages of the Spirit. I must journey inward to meet the Triune God that dwells within me.

To say all this may seem strange in the first chapter of a book which concerns, as you will soon see, a desert experience. But it is vitally important at the outset to emphasize that there is no need for a log cabin, cottages, huts, in order to lead a life of prayer. Prayer is interior. The hut, the log cabin, the chapel, is the human heart in which we must learn how to pray. Solitude sometimes helps prayer, and for special vocations is the cradle of prayer, and powerful prayer at that. But for the average Christian, prayer doesn't need a geographic spot. Prayer is a contact of love between God and man.

Married people don't need a bedroom to make love. One can make love anywhere, and "making love" does not necessarily mean immediately what people think it means! Making love can mean looking into each other's eyes. It can mean holding hands tightly. It means being aware of each other in the midst of a crowd. So it is with prayer. In the intense stillness of a loving heart all of a person strains toward the beloved, and words—simple, gentle, tender—come forth, audible or inaudible as the case may be.

To confuse prayer with solitude, to say that I must have solitude in which to pray, is a fallacy. It is good to have periodic solitude. Such is the plea of the present book. It is good to gather oneself up, to be awake with the Lord in Gethsemane, to watch not only one hour with him but perhaps more, all along the way of his Incarnation and on to Golgotha, on to the Resurrection, on to the bosom of the Father and the Spirit.

But this "solitude" requires only a small place. It can

be a room in a large convent or monastery. It can be a place in the attic or the basement of a family home. It may be a part of a room, separated by curtains. That would be a sufficient temporary solitude for simple recollection and greater peace. The daily noises of the street, of the family, of the staff of convents and monasteries would form a gentle reminder that we never pray alone, and never for ourselves alone.

Prayer is a full-time affair; solitude, unless called to a lifetime of it by God, must always be a temporary thing, lest it ceases to be solitude and becomes an escape. Unfortunately, the two are often mentioned in the same breath, whereas their roles in our lives with the Lord are different. Thanks be to God for the renewed desire to pray! But let us walk softly, and consult wise men, about our desire for solitude. It may be a grave temptation.

## 2

### *Poustinia and Poustinik*

While firmly believing that silence and solitude are above all else attitudes of the mind and heart, I have for a long time now felt that we should be doing something more. Ours is a tragic century when men are faced with tremendous decisions that shake the souls of the strongest. This is also the age of neuroses, of anxiety, of fears, of psychotherapy, tranquilizers, euphoriants—all symbols of man's desire to escape from reality, responsibility and decision-making.

This is the age of idol-worship—status, wealth and power. The idols dominate the landscape like idols of old: they are squatly and fat. The First Commandment once again lies broken in the dust. The clouds of war, dark and foreboding—an incredible war of annihilation and utter destruction—come nearer. Dirge-like symphonies surround us and will not let us be.

What is the answer to all these darknesses that press so heavily on us? What are the answers to all these fears that make darkness at noon? What is the answer to the loneliness of men without God? What is the answer to the hatred of man toward God?

I think I have one answer—the *poustinia* (pronounced