

Totum Vita Contemplativa



*Our Lord assures the contemplative that not only does He accept her great desire to serve Him more directly and immediately, but He Himself has given the desire: “One thing is necessary...Mary has chosen the **best** part, and it shall never be taken from her.” (Luke 10:42)*

When one finds something “optimal” in the “true and good” department, one cannot just leave it as a sidenote in one’s life. And this is even more true of the call of the contemplative nun. For the contemplative nun, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass must be Everything. The Divine Office must be Everything. Scripture and Dogma must be Everything. Silence, solitude, and mental prayer must be Everything. Life inside the cloister must be Everything. For the contemplative nun, God must be Everything and the only Thing – the *unum est necessarium*.

Today faithful Catholics are painfully aware of the effects of liturgical, doctrinal, and moral confusion on the culture and on families. What may not be as obvious is the effects this confusion has had on the wholly contemplative life (and thus on all religious life). This confusion was in fact intended to gradually accustom religious to relegate God to the place of a sidenote, which is the opposite of the purpose for their existence, as this theological and historical reflection manifests.

The contemplative monastic life is rooted in the Old Testament. The radical response of Abram to leave Ur allows him exclusive covenantal intimacy. The silence and solitude of Horeb and Sinai specially prepares Moses for “speaking face to face.” The separation of the nation of Israel from all other nations throughout its history facilitates unadulterated worship and high liturgy. Elijah the Tishbite, not to mention all the Prophets, suffer in a solitary and salutary way for God’s chosen people, who are not able to understand. The zeal of the Machabees and the Qumran for God alone, with the Baptist, prepares the way of the Lord.

In the New Covenant, the Blessed Virgin is the paradigm of the contemplative life, conceiving the God-Man in the total silence of the Shekinah. The Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ is hypostatically united to the God-head in the hiddenness of an Immaculate womb. Nazareth conceals an unspeakable union of prayer for thirty years. Jesus responds to His Father by solitary vigils of communion throughout His public ministry, a communion finally consummated in His Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, and so also in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

Even before the age of the martyrs, the Desert Hermits, beginning with Paul the Hermit (270), lived in Egypt and the present Near East. St. Anthony of the Desert began in a hut, close to the village, gradually distancing himself from the public eye. Hermits and monks lived in deserts like Sketis, and Nitria, in Egypt, or the caves of Palestine. Some, like Isaiah the Solitary and Evagrius, responded to God’s call by retreating further from community for the purpose of deeper purification and the prayer that makes that possible.

St John of Damaskas in the *Philokalia* shows the seriousness with which the early monastics lived the Gospel: “Besides [avoiding these vices], there are the bodily virtues or, rather, the tools or instruments of virtue. When used with understanding, in accordance with God’s will, and without the least hypocrisy or desire to win men’s esteem, they make it possible to advance in humility and dispassion. They are self-control, fasting, hunger, thirst, staying awake, keeping all-night vigils, constant kneeling, not washing, the wearing of a single garment, eating dry food, eating slowly, drinking nothing but water, sleeping on the ground, poverty, total shedding of possessions, austerity, disregard of personal appearance, unselfishness, solitude, preserving stillness, not going out, enduring scarcity...”

Monastic communities tended to form around Abbas, or Fathers of the Desert, because they were considered the spiritual masters. The writings, stories, and sayings, and the various monastic rules of both East and West, for example in the *Philokalia*, in St. John Cassian’s *Conferences* and *Institutes*, the rules of Ss. Pachomius, Basil, and other greats, analogize the monastic life, and particularly the eremitical life, with Jesus temptation in the desert. The anchorite in his solitude allows God to “prove” him against the world, the flesh, and the devil. There are psychological and spiritual battles to discover and fight, with the help of God.

Evagrius the Solitary says in his *Texts on Discrimination in Respect of Passions and Thoughts (Philokalia Volume 1)*, “Sit down and recall in solitude the things that have happened: where you started and where you went [in your thoughts], in what place you were seized by the spirit of unchastity, dejection or anger and how it all happened. Examine these things closely and commit them to memory, so that you will then be ready to expose the demon when he next approaches you. Try to become conscious of the weak spot in yourself which he hid from you, and you will not follow him again. If you wish to enrage him, expose him at once when he reappears, and tell him just where you went first, and where next, and so on. For he becomes very angry and cannot bear the disgrace. And the proof that you spoke to him effectively is that the thoughts he suggested leave

you. For he cannot remain in action when he is openly exposed. In the hermitage the Lord heals the wounds of the seven deadly sins for the purpose of total surrender of the creature to Himself - called hesychast, or quietness, by the Fathers. Hesychast, or simply “contemplative prayer,” does not destroy the contemplative, but only the hidden impurities of the soul.

In the movement of monasticism to the West, great saints clung to the eastern value of separation from the world for the purpose of silence and solitude with God. This marvelous synthesis of coenobitical life with eremitical life is largely forgotten in modernity, yet it was the first form of monastic life founded in the west, for example, at Liguge, France by St. Martin de Tours in the 4th century. In the 6th century, the early foundations of the Order of St. Benedict mitigated the Psalter to once a week without loss of melodic chants, or time in the regular observance for the solitary prayer of monks and nuns. The Order of Carthusians at La Grande Chartreuse in the early 12th century re-established the importance of the eremitical element of monastic life, also without losing any of the richness of its liturgical chant or life in common.

This ancient form of the **wholly contemplative** monastic life, affording the safety of the common life while maintaining the contemplative union with God made possible in solitary prayer was the basis for all religious life coming after. As often as coenobitic monasticism needed reform, Bernards, Brunos, Romualds, and Giustinianis fled to the deserts, mountains, or swamps to keep alive the desire for the “unum est necessarium” (Luke 10:42). The Carthusians and the Camaldolese today remain the only vestige of monasticism in the West in which there remains time in the hororium for solitude. An Eastern Rite Archimandrite noted in his book *Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church* that being true to these authentic monastic ideals has renewed the Church throughout the centuries.

As modern society has worked to blur the distinctions between God and creation, good and bad, truth and falsehood, male and female, even between rational and non-rational creatures, the distinction between the religious life and the life of the laity has also been blurred. And not only the distinction between the lay faithful and the religious life but also the distinctions between the various forms of religious life in the Church have been blurred. This “equalization” of the various states of life has the end result of phasing out the highest – yes, highest – state of life: the cloistered monastic contemplative life.

One only has to note the truth of this by observation. In service-oriented post-modernity, the relevance of prayer itself is in question. The earthly supersedes the transcendent. Sitting still, alone, and silent for any length of time is either terrifying to the modern person or completely lost on him. To separate oneself from the mundane in order to face oneself and encounter God in the reality of prayer is the desire of every human heart, and yet foreign even to the religiously minded. Among both lay and religious, solitary prayer is something one “fits in as best you can.” With so much of God’s work to do, after all, so many people to help, it is difficult to justify any kind of prayer that does not have some sort of “purpose” attached to it. Even contemplative nuns are inclined to emphasize their own intercessory “function.” Prayer has now become utilitarian.

Today, the grave error of an activity focused contemplative life persists even in contemplative monasteries. The progressive dissipation of contemplative monastic life has paralleled the progressive revolutions of Humanism, Protestantism, the Enlightenment, Modernism, and culminating in the revolution that occurred during and after Vatican II. Let this example suffice to illustrate the permeation of these revolutions into the whole of contemplative life. In one contemplative community a retreat was given in which the retreat master (a prominent U.S. seminary professor) insisted that in order to “think with the Church,” the sisters should imitate

Martha rather than Mary (Luke 10:42). At recreation that evening, all the sisters (except one) concurred by saying that if Mary were fully integrated, she would have gotten up to give Martha some help!

This novel and prevalent interpretation of *sentire cum ecclesia* (thinking with the Church) goes by the oxymoron “new tradition” and has caused the phenomenon of sisters being called “strange,” or “prideful,” or “arrogant” for using what little free time there is for personal prayer. The permeation of these errors produce communities that will never suffice for the resurgence of the contemplative life, because those who want to love God with the radicality of Mary the sister of Martha will never be allowed to do so within “new tradition” cloister walls.

Loving God with the radicality of Mary is not to just isolate this one scene of Scripture to the exclusion of all the rest, as the seminary professor retreat master claimed. But rather, loving God with the radicality of Mary is commensurate with the *whole* of Scripture, and the *whole* of Tradition. In fact, it is the Traditional Latin Mass which most fully expresses and nourishes the radicality of Mary (who by the way was the one who spent all that expensive spikenard on Our Lord’s dirty feet).

This modern misunderstanding of contemplative monastic life has directly resulted in a sparsity of authentic contemplative monastic communities *in general* to house all the women God is calling, especially as a result of the resurgence of the Traditional Latin Mass. But missing also is the *variety* of ancient monastic expressions. The Benedictines and the Carmelites certainly have shaped the monastic life of the Latin Rite. But these women’s communities are today strictly *coenobitical* (κοινωνία : “koinonia” “communal”) expressions of monastic life (even if they did not begin as such). The hororium, or monastic schedule, emphasizes a fully common life, which though beautiful and holy, often leaves little room for private prayer, sacred study, and time in the cell alone with God. In modern times there exists ***no (Traditional) monastic communities*** of women *at all* with an *eremitical* (ἐρημος : “eremos” or “desert”) component in the daily hororium.

The disappearance of any practical time for solitary prayer in monasticism causes a woman religious to forget her ***end***. We whom God calls to flee the world for a perfect consecration to Himself ought to understand well the words of Saint Paul, “I estimate all things to be nothing, except the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ...for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, that I may gain Christ...and be found in Him...that I may know Him, and the power flowing from His Resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being configured to His Death...” Jesus assures the contemplative that not only does He accept this great desire to serve Him more directly and immediately, but He Himself has given the desire. “One thing is necessary...Mary has chosen the *optimam partem*, and it shall never be taken from her.” (Luke 10:42)

The Carthusian Statutes take up this theme: “Let Martha have her active ministry, very praiseworthy indeed, yet not without solicitude and agitation: nevertheless, let her bear with her sister, as she follows in the steps of Christ, in stillness knows that He is God, purifies her spirit, praying in the depths of her soul, seeks to hear what God may speak within her; and thus, tastes and sees – in the slender measure possible, though but faintly in a dark mirror – how good the Lord is, and also pours forth prayer for Martha herself.”

St. Paul Giustiniani, reformer of the Camaldolese, writes profoundly that there should be at least some who really live hidden from the public eye, and dedicated to the monastic life. He asserts that the component of solitude is of the essence of the wholly contemplative life. The source of the intercessory power of the *moniales eremitici* is an existence that is in constant dialogue with their Divine Master, in constant attention to the Triune God united to the soul by grace. Much more than conscious remembering of intentions, although there is that,

strict separation from the world and times of solitude means withdrawing from ordinary everyday relationships with creatures and the world to focus wholly on the Creator. A strict detachment in every part of the nun is not only made easier by this separation, but is impossible without it. Paradoxically, this does not exclude creation, but encompasses it, savors it more acutely, through the inner transformation of likeness to Christ and union with the Trinity.

Nourished by the traditional Mass and Office chanted in common, the eremitical component of monastic life frees the nun to be obsessed with God. Intellectual effort in theological study, pouring over the Scriptures, and with the help of God, she should let no obstacle or attachment go unchecked that could come between her and the Divine Bridegroom. Persevering in this ongoing *metanoia* is the sacrifice of her life. Remaining in a life devoted and directed entirely to prayer, as both the general and specific end of the vows, Jesus promises, "It shall never be taken from her." (Luke 10:42).

This life of prayer is the lifeline of the spiritual desert, because it necessarily excludes the pressures of the world. In fact, the demise of this ancient form of life has long fed the post-Christian attitudes of the world. Paul VI pleaded in 1964: "May St. Benedict return to help us to recuperate the personal type of life which today we anxiously look for; which the development of modern-day living, on whose account we feel the exasperated desire to be ourselves, suffocates while promoting, deludes while making us conscious of it.... Commotion, din, feverish activity, outward appearances and the crowd all threaten man's inner awareness. He lacks silence with its genuine voice speaking in the depths of his being; he lacks order, he lacks prayer, he lacks peace, he lacks himself."

Compare the ancient exhortation of Evagrius the Solitary in his *Outline Teaching on Asceticism and Stillness in the Solitary Life* (*Philokalia* Volume One). "Do you desire, then, to embrace this life of solitude, and to seek out the blessings of stillness? If so, abandon the cares of the world, and the principalities and powers that lie behind them; free yourself from attachment to material things, from domination by passions and desires, so that as a stranger to all this you may attain true stillness. For only by raising himself above these things can a man achieve the life of stillness." Understand that this ancient exhortation could be made this way, while Pope Paul VI's plea to St. Benedict was a desperate one based on the already dimming light of faith throughout the world.

The ancient monastics did not need exhortations to the "*unum est necessarium*." Abba Philemon wrote: "The saints were people of this kind. They were totally severed from the ways of the world, and by keeping the vision of heaven unsullied in themselves they made its light shine by observing the divine laws. And having mortified their earthly aspects (cf. Col. 3:5) through self-control and through awe and love for God, they were radiant with holy words and actions. For through unceasing prayer and the study of the divine Scriptures the soul's noetic eyes are opened, and they see the King of the celestial powers, and great joy and fierce longing burn intensely in the soul; and as the flesh, too, is taken up by the Spirit, man becomes wholly spiritual. These are the things which those who in solitude practice blessed stillness and the strictest way of life, and who have separated themselves from all human solace, confess openly to the Lord in heaven alone.'

The contemplative monastic life provides a painfully acute awareness of the creature's nothingness before God. It provides the atmosphere for total continual conversion, in the constant presence of both the Justice and the Mercy of God Himself. While those in the world flee silence and solitude, and so flee from God, a contemplative religious is obligated to remain in the cell and the cloister to face herself and God, and her sisters, with no

escape. Fidelity to solitude and cloister is salvific not only for the nun herself, but also obtains grace for those who cannot or will not respond to God's invitations.

The contemplative life can be lived fully only in a real, distinct, and not just symbolic, separation from secular culture. Silence, solitude, and high liturgy, is only possible in strict cloister. The contemplative religious life is not *meant* to be lived in the world. The lay state is an *earthly* state of life, not an eschatological one. An eschatological vocation is a sign of what all the faithful will live in the "eschaton," that is, the Resurrection of the body. Our Lord said: "My Kingdom is not of *this* world." The fullest realization of the eschatological element of the Church is the monastic cloistered contemplative life. This way of life makes no sense to those trapped in the immanence of man-centered religion.

A real distinction among the vocations must exist which includes a state of life which gives primacy to the things of heaven by *embracing*, not *escaping*, the **protections** of the enclosure. In times past the Church has defended those conditions under which the contemplative life can flourish. To preserve *greater* separation from the world. To preserve silence, solitude, and recollection in the cloister. To give a *pre-eminence* to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the Divine Office, and this in the sacred language of the Church. Only with all these components can nuns fully live and suffer daily increasing in charity.

Cloisters exist so that some members of the Mystical Body can be protected from succumbing to the attitudes of the kingdom of "**this world**." And when there are monasteries of nuns who do **not** succumb to this worldly kingdom, the contemplative life will thrive, both inside the monastery and among Christ's faithful. But very few in the Church understand this. Jesus Christ has promised, "My kingdom is not of this world!" He has also asked us, "When I return, will I find any faith on earth?"