SEEKING GOD ALONE?
ANCHORITIC MONASTICISM AND GOSPEL ETHICS

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By

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ABSTRACT

According to the Evangelists, the narrative Jesus charges his followers to love one another. He tells them that the sole measure by which they will earn a heavenly reward is the extent to which they provide for the less fortunate. The primary obligation of the faithful Christian then is to demonstrate his love of God and fellow man by improving the lot of other human beings (Matthew 25:31-46). The Roman Catholic Church has codified these instructions into two lists, traditionally called the Corporeal and Spiritual Acts of Mercy.¹

Practicing one of the oldest forms of Christian monasticism, an anchorite removes himself from society in order to pursue solitary communion with the divine. This paper asks, “Is such eremitic withdrawal a legitimate response to the teachings and example of the narrative Jesus?” If the goal of Christianity is in fact the death of self in service and love of others, how can physical separation with the goal of personal spiritual development be justified?

¹ Corporeal: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, offering hospitality to the homeless, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned, burying the dead. Spiritual: admonishing the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving all injuries, praying for the living and the dead.
This paper begins with a historical analysis, which defines the problem and establishes a brief history of early Christian anchoritic monasticism and the development of Christian contemplative prayer. It continues with a comparative analysis of the two primary motivations for withdrawal: the desire to move to union with divinity, and the desire to escape from the world. The third section is a critical analysis, outlining the main arguments in favor of monasticism from a cenobitic perspective; most of which are applicable to an anchoritic vocation. A second section of historical analysis follows, which addresses the attraction of wilderness to the anchorite. The penultimate section is a critical analysis of the twentieth century’s most eloquent hermit’s writings on solitude. The last section is an apologetic analysis, addressing the arguments of one of monasticism’s most respected detractors.

The paper concludes that no eremitic withdrawal can simultaneously be both total and authentically Christian. Successful and genuine Christian anchoritism always involves a “return” to involvement in communal life where the grace and love of God, experienced in solitude, are mediated to others. While the nature of this return is malleable and may not be a physical one, it must exist.
PREFACE

For many years the author has been fascinated by monastic life and the ways in which various Orders have interpreted The Rule of Saint Benedict. He has made three week-long retreats, two at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky (Cistercian) and one—as part of his research for this paper—at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in Abiquiu, New Mexico (Benedictine). He is a Benedictine Oblate at Saint Anselm’s Abbey in Washington, DC.

He attempts, haltingly, to maintain a practice of contemplative prayer, and knows that he is a better husband, father, son, brother, and human being when he makes time to meditate.

As a result, this thesis is an inquiry into an issue with profound significance to the author’s life. It is an exploration with theoretical, but perhaps more importantly, practical ramifications. It is intended to be a thoughtful essay on a question of personal interest and not a definitive study intended to resolve once and for all a scholarly debate. His foray into the literature does not pretend to be exhaustive, but is sufficient to advance his own—and he hopes others’—understanding of a vexing issue to the point where it is possible to arrive at a personally satisfying conclusion.
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DEDICATION

To my wife, Jan M. Brabham,
whose idea it was to begin this degree
and whose support ultimately made it possible.
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INTRODUCTION

For as long as human beings have believed in deities, the devoted members of faith communities have sought to do the will of their gods. Satisfying a supreme being—by first discerning and then achieving its wishes—is perhaps the greatest struggle of religious life. This process of discernment and labor is rife with opportunities for confusion, frustration, and hopelessness. It is also open to the interpretation of each individual seeker as he or she reflects on fulfilling the divine will.

In the Christian tradition, this work has taken two main forms. Both are based in scripture, both are the result of centuries of prayerful reflection. Both have had thousands of practitioners. Both are valid and, in their purest forms, deeply alike and deeply at odds with one another. Consistent with church terminology, we will call them the *active* and *contemplative* traditions.¹

Those who follow the *active* tradition work in the world, performing what the Church has traditionally called the corporeal works of mercy. They see the Gospel accounts of Jesus teaching his followers to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, care for the sick, visit the prisoner, etc. as the preeminent aspect of living a Christian life, and

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¹ See the story of Mary and Martha. (Luke 10:38-42)
thereby accomplishing God’s will. In their understanding of God’s wishes for them, they are charged with bettering the lot of the disadvantaged, improving the world by the work of their hands and the funds of their purse. They are to make a tangible difference in the lives of those who are forced to do without the basic things necessary for a healthy human existence: food, clothing, shelter, kindness. Motivated by love, those who follow the active tradition are to make the world a more humane place by meeting the physical needs of their fellow men.

Practitioners of the contemplative tradition tend to withdraw from the bustle of the world. They live in isolation or in small communities and—believing in the Gospel teaching that Jesus’ followers must give up everything and follow him—spend the bulk of their days in manual labor and intercessory prayer. Again Jesus is the model, but in this second response to the Gospels, selflessness takes a subtly different form: the contemplative life is less a giving of self and the self’s resources and more a Pauline death of self and rededication of a new self, a new man. This model gives primacy of place not to Jesus the healer, but to the Jesus who chose to live his life in poverty at the fringes of society, the Jesus who would withdraw and pray to his Father in private.

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2 In terms of hermeneutics and critical methodology, it is vital to emphasize what the Gospels are not. They are not history or biography as we have come to know those genres, but they are not fabrications either. They are a “faith interpretation” of Jesus’ life and ministry. That is to say that they are an author’s honest and loving attempt to apply the lessons of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection to that author’s life and the life of his community. In this work, the references to Jesus are consistent with this understanding.
Contemplatives understand the Gospel message to be a profoundly countercultural one. They understand their charge as one of relinquishment, an acetic withdrawal from the profane in order to spend a life fulfilling God’s will that they pray unceasingly for the benefit of His creation. Motivated by love, they are to make the world a more humane place by meeting the spiritual needs of their fellow men.

Both of these traditions have deep foundations in the Gospel texts. The societal benefits each fosters have been borne out by centuries of human experience. Both seem to be “valid” insofar as they are internally logical within the greater Christian context. Both seem efficacious, albeit the benefits of the contemplative life may, at first blush, be more difficult to quantify readily. Both of these models seek to heal the world—an idea called tikkun olam in Hebrew—to make it a holier place, a place governed more by love, compassion, and selflessness.

There is a great deal of evidence that the active tradition “works.” That is to say the lives of countless human beings have been changed for the better because of it. Perhaps improvements on a systemic level are fleeting, but one only need go to the Missionaries of Charity soup kitchen on Wheeler Road in the Anacostia neighborhood of southeast Washington—or thousands of sites like it—to see that active gospel ethics improve the lives of specific individuals in a meaningful way, if sometimes only for a short duration.
On the other hand, the contemplative tradition doesn’t seem to be quite so “helpful.” Arising at 4:00am to attend the morning prayers of the monks at St. Anselm’s Abbey on South Dakota Avenue, you will observe a group of mostly elderly men gathered in a darkened church and singing psalms. “What use is this?” you might ask. The answer of course depends on your belief in the power of intercessory prayer. These men are firm in their belief that they too are doing the work of God. They too are working to improve the condition of God’s creation. How? They would argue by simply and faithfully praying for it.

Yet these men are living in community. They are “cenobites,” from the Greek for “common life.” Their monastery—in the words of St. Benedict—should be “a school for the Lord’s service” (Benedict 1998, 5). The monks can practice the active ethics of the Gospel with one another. What are we to make of the holy men and women who live lives apart, the hermits or “anchorites,” from the Greek meaning “to withdraw?” How can they practice gospel ethics in isolation?

What too is the evidence that the contemplative tradition works? Initially, we must point to its survival, its longevity. Clearly something of merit must be going on for monasticism to have lasted so long, for it to have attracted men and women consistently for thousands of years.
Second we note the traditional and continuing importance of monastic communities and anchoritic hermitages as the loci for pilgrimage. These monks are sought out by fellow seekers; they embody wisdom, authority, and example for those who wish to live a life more centered on God.

In the pages that follow, I hope to reconcile the solitary contemplative life with the narrative Jesus’ instruction to love God and neighbor. While it appears that a dialectical gulf separates these two aspects of Christian history and practice, my position is that they are inexorably linked.
CHAPTER 1
INTO EMPTINESS: THE MOTIVATION AND PRACTICE OF EARLY ANCHORITES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

In Scetis, a brother went to see Abba Moses and begged him for a word. And the old man said: Go and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.

—Desert Wisdom: Sayings From the Desert Fathers
Yushi Nomura, trans.

Initially it is important to establish a brief history of early Christian anchoritic monasticism. To that end, we must turn to Roman Egypt and the desert around Alexandria in the latter half of the third century CE. According to Christian belief, Jesus had ascended into heaven, promising to come again more than two hundred years earlier. Believers who expected an imminent parousia had died without witnessing it and now their descendants in the faith realized that they might be in for a considerable wait. Many of the earliest believers had indeed followed Jesus’ instructions to sell their worldly possessions, choosing to live austere lives in preparation for the judgment day. Now that such a reckoning seemed further off, Christians began to reconcile their faith with lives of comfort and privilege (France 1996, 22). However, many in the community were not ready to do that. One such person was a young man named Anthony.
St. Anthony began his anchoritic career by apprenticing himself to an ascetic who lived on the outskirts of a village. This liminal existence was common among anchorites. Their position on the edges of society made it easier to get support if they needed it, but more importantly allowed them to fulfill one of their primary roles, which was that of a withdrawn and therefore impartial mediator of conflicts.

Ultimately, once he had learned the basic techniques of self-discipline and denial, Anthony sought greater isolation. As he became more adept at the solitary life he sought greater and greater solitude. He retired to an abandoned tomb where he had the spiritual breakthrough described below in Chapter Four. He then moved to an abandoned fortress where he lived alone for some twenty years (Cowan 2006, 33).

All this begs the question: What was Anthony hoping to accomplish? What were his goals in deepening his solitude by moving further and further into isolation? To our modern minds, this seems as if it might betray some sort of pathology, a neurosis vis a vis community or other people. The Church of the period would have been terribly concerned that Anthony’s behavior was a manifestation of the heretical Gnostic teaching that called for extreme ascesis in response to the duality of body and soul (France 1996, 21-22). As it turns out, neither was the case.

What Anthony sought was salvation, but not in the limited sense of personal admission to heaven after death. Instead he sought a condition of being saved from all
that diverted him from a life of holiness, all that tempted him and stank of evil, all that prevented him from living a life in communion with God and his fellow man. He sought to live a life like Christ, a life that reflected an intimate and permanent understanding of the divine will, and obedience to it. And especially a life that, initially through isolation and solitude, would bring the love of God into the world, both for His greater glory and for the benefit of all His creation. Anthony’s devout and humble wish was to be a recipient of God’s grace and to be an instrument for its manifestation in the world.

This cannot be brought about by an act of will. Critical to Anthony’s experiment was the renunciation of the culturally constructed self and the abandonment of any sense of autonomy or self-sufficiency. Anthony’s insight was that in silence and isolation God works to strip away the false and ultimately meaningless selves with which society blankets its members. Only the diminution—and ultimate dissolution and disappearance—of these artifices can show human beings their true nature as completely dependent children of God. Like a refiner’s fire, the practices of Anthony and other anchorites like him burn away the impurities in their lives. The anchorites initially dwell in a protracted and trying Lenten existence. Ultimately though, they emerge into lives of perpetual Eastertide. St. Athanasius, Anthony’s biographer, describes the anchorite’s emergence from the fortress after two decades in language reminiscent of the Resurrection:
Antony, as from a shrine, came forth initiated in the mysteries and filled with the Spirit of God. Then for the first time he was seen outside the fort by those who came to see him. And they, when they saw him, wondered at the sight, for he had the same habit of body as before, and was neither fat, like a man without exercise, nor lean from fasting and striving with the demons, but he was just the same as they had known him before his retirement, And again his soul was free from blemish, for it was neither contracted as if by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor possessed by laughter or dejection, for he was not troubled when he beheld the crowd, nor overjoyed at being saluted by so many. But he was altogether even as being guided by reason, and abiding in a natural state. Through him the Lord healed the bodily ailments of many present, and cleansed others from evil spirits. And He gave grace to Antony in speaking, so that he consoled many that were sorrowful, and set those at variance at one, exhorting all to prefer the love of Christ before all that is in the world. And while he exhorted and advised them to remember the good things to come, and the loving-kindness of God towards us, 'Who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all,' he persuaded many to embrace the solitary life. And thus it happened in the end that cells arose even in the mountains, and the desert was colonised by monks, who came forth from their own people, and enrolled themselves for the citizenship in the heavens. (Athanasius 1998)

Anthony has “won.” He has reclaimed the desert from the devil; he has become a vehicle for grace in the world.

This achievement is accomplished by a powerful combination of prayer, asceticism, faith, and grace. It is a demanding and difficult process, but one in which a sense of balance and perspective must be maintained. Peter France writes:

Although the Desert Fathers were widely acclaimed for the ferocity of their ascetic practices and the heroism of their self-denial, there are many stories which promote the need for moderation. They remembered how Moses sent a message to the King of Edom to say that his people would pass through the land turning aside neither left nor right but following
the Royal Road, the King’s Highway (Numbers 20:17) This became a symbol of the *via media*, the road between extremes which is the better way. . . . (France 1996, 44)

Some monks did indeed have a tendency to take corporeal mortification to extremes. This was to be discouraged.

The literature that emerges from this desert tradition is in the form of collections of sayings from the older and wiser monastics. France quotes many on the topic of moderation. This is perhaps the loveliest metaphor of the lot:

One of the desert hunters visited Father Anthony when he was relaxing with the brothers and was scandalized by the levity. The Abbas, wishing to make him understand that it was necessary from time to time to indulge the brothers, said to him: “Put an arrow in your bow and draw it.” He did so and the Abbas said: “Draw it a little further.” And he did so. The Abbas said again: “Draw it further,” and the hunter replied: “If I draw my bow too far it will break.” Then the Abbas said: “So it is with the work of God. If we stretch the brothers too much, they will quickly break. So we must from time to time, relax and indulge them.” (France 1996, 46)

While there is significant sacrifice and self-denial inherent in eremitic life, asceticism should never take primacy of place from the main goal, namely the experience of God’s presence and love and the mediation of those divine traits to the wider world.

Well prior to Anthony and soon after the death of Christ, in fact, small groups of men and a few women had made the decision to abandon what they saw as the hollow promises of a worldly life. They moved into wilderness caves in Egypt and Syria and began to live together in small cenobitic groups or alone as hermits. They sought
communion with God through a life characterized by simplicity and prayer. They strove to find God in each moment, to recognize His hand and presence in all aspects of the world around them, to be a conduit of God’s love in the world. Thomas Merton writes:

> They [the Desert Fathers and Mothers] were careful not to go looking for extraordinary experiences, and contented themselves with the struggle for “purity of heart” and for control of their thoughts, to keep their minds and hearts empty of care and concern, so that they might altogether forget themselves and apply themselves entirely to the love and service of God. (Merton 1996, 20)

This was the infancy of Christian mysticism.

> These seekers came to realize that meditation was imperative to achieving the state of grace they sought. Focusing the mind on the repetition of one or more verses of the Psalms constantly emphasized and reinforced the saving love of God. This method became the key to the monks’ union with the divine.

> From the beginning though, this was not a selfish enterprise. These men and women knew that they needed to reorder their own lives, but they never forgot the responsibility they bore to their fellow human beings. Thomas Merton writes:

> The Coptic hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck, did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them. (Merton 1960, 23)
One of the primary ways they fulfilled this obligation was by teaching others what they had learned.

Sometime in the late fourth century, a monk from Dalmatia left his monastery in Bethlehem to study with these wise men of the desert. He was St. John Cassian (c.360-433), and he wrote down the sermons of the hermits he encountered in a work entitled *Conferences*. In Chapter VII of Conference 10 we understand the consummation so devoutly wished by these contemplatives. Abba Isaac tells the younger Cassian, “This, I say, is the end of all perfection, that the mind purged from all carnal desires may daily be lifted towards spiritual things, until the whole life and all the thoughts of the heart become one continuous prayer” (Cassian 1996-1999).

Cassian and his fellow monk Germanus are thrilled yet bewildered. This is what they hope for themselves. The goal is clear, but the description of the holy state to be reached begs the question, “How do we get there?” The novices press Isaac for a technique; they want practical instructions. He tells them that the perfect formula “delivered to us by a few of those who were left of the oldest fathers” (Cassian 1996-1999) is the second verse of the seventieth psalm: “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.” This prayer Isaac teaches must be their constant companion.
For the last sixteen hundred years, this form of prayer has flourished in the abbeys and hermitages of the world. The only major practical difference is that Orthodox monastics usually use a formulation of what came to be called the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” In either case, repeating these prayers constantly helps bring the faithful closer to their ultimate goal of loving others with the heart of God.

Around 530 A.D. Benedict of Nursia wrote the Rule that would come to govern nearly all of Western cenobitic monasticism. In it he established a second widely used form of prayer. Given the increase in monastic literacy, this technique had at its center the reading of holy texts. It was called lectio divina and was divided into four parts or stages.

The first stage is lectio, or reading. As the name makes clear, this stage involves mindful and careful reading, while opening the heart to the revelation contained in the text. The practitioner reads while waiting for a passage or phrase to resonate in some deeper way. When the practitioner identifies the segment of the text which he perceives to be the most meaningful, he moves to the next stage, meditatio, or meditation.

In the meditatio stage, the practitioner reflects on how the special passage spoke to him. He ruminates on the meaning of the words with the goal of assimilating the message and thereby producing a prayerful response to it. This response constitutes the
third step, oratorio, or prayer, in which the practitioner speaks to God as the inspirer of
the sacred text. He gives thanks for the gift of the message, and prays for the grace to
carry it out. Lastly comes contemplatio, or contemplation, in which the practitioner,
having entered the presence of the divine through oratorio and no longer thinking with
the mind, rests silently in the company of God.

Despite these clear distinctions, the practical matter of monastic prayer is far
less compartmentalized. Thomas Merton writes:

In the way of prayer, as described by the early monastic writers, meditatio must be seen in close relation to . . . lectio, oratorio, and contemplatio. It is part of a continuous whole, the entire unified life of a monk, conversatio monastica, his turning from the world to God. To separate meditation from prayer, reading, and contemplation is to falsify
our picture of the monastic way of prayer. (Merton 1996, 29)

These four components blend and merge into a sort of holy cocktail of devotion. Once
genuinely immersed in the method, a religious would move back and forth through the
stages with such facility that any distinctions between them would be rendered moot.

Merton continues, explaining that contemplative prayer is not merely a proven
path to God, but a genuine way of being with God.

In proportion as meditation takes on a more contemplative character, we see that it is not only a means to an end, but also has something of the nature of an end. Hence monastic prayer, especially meditation and contemplative prayer, is not so much a way to find God as a way of
resting in him whom we have found, who loves us, who is near us, who
comes to us to draw us to himself. Dominus enim prope est. Prayer,
reading, meditation and contemplation fill the apparent “void” of
monastic solitude and silence with the reality of God’s presence. . . . 
(Merton 1996, 29)

And so this system of Benedict’s is a powerful tool indeed. Not only does it allow the
Christian faithful to absorb the lessons of holy texts in a profound way, but it also
mediates the presence of their God.

A second major contribution in the evolution and development of contemplative
prayer is a fourteenth-century treatise written by an anonymous religious in the
midlands of England. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a set of instructions from a monk to
his twenty-four year old charge. This work is centered on a lovely metaphor: when
practicing properly, the meditator rests between two figurative clouds. The cloud below
him is the “Cloud of Forgetting,” beneath which he must push the distractions of the
world. The cloud above him is the titular “Cloud of Unknowing,” which obstructs his
experience of God. This “in-between” is the liminal space into which the seeker must
enter. Here the meditator waits for the Divine to reveal itself. The darkness is not to be
feared, but to be embraced as the locus of any possible interaction between the seeker
and God.

And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest,
evermore crying after Him that thou lovest. For if ever thou shalt feel
Him or see Him, as it may be here, it behooveth always to be in this
cloud in this darkness. And if thou wilt busily travail as I bid thee, I trust
in His mercy that thou shalt come thereto. (Anonymous 1997, 54)
The meditator cannot will a divine encounter to happen, he can only wait prayerfully in his utter dependence.

In terms of method, the Cloud’s author moves away from the repetition of Biblical phrases and towards a one-word formulation. Coupled with God’s grace, a single monosyllabic utterance—he recommends “God” or “Love”—is an all-purpose tool for overcoming the challenges faced by the meditator.

This word shall be thy shield and spear, whether thou ridest on peace or on war. With this word, thou shalt smite down all manner of thought under the cloud of forgetting. Insomuch, that if any thought press upon thee to ask thee what thou wouldest have, answer them with no more words but this one word. (Anonymous 1997, 64)

The one-word mantra beats back the distractions of the world and the active mind, allowing the stillness necessary for an experience of God’s love and peace.

Both of these techniques—as well as modern hybrids like William Keating’s and Basil Pennington’s Centering Prayer—combined with the gift of God’s grace, help the practitioner to see the divinity of others and to act as a conduit of God’s love to them; the contemplative helps God disseminate His love to His creation. God is, of course, the prime mover in this ultimately circular system. Merton writes, “Love comes out of God and gathers us to God in order to pour itself back into God through all of us and bring us all back to Him on the tide of His own infinite mercy. So we all become

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doors and windows through which God shines back into His own house” (Merton 1972, 67).

Contemplative prayer and the grace of God allow the practitioner to pray, “Lord, grant me the strength and the presence of mind to be merciful and compassionate to others today. Let me go out of my way to show Your children Your love for them. Let me see Christ in them always. Let them feel Christ’s love for them through me.”

John Barbour has done some fascinating work addressing the ethics of solitude as they relate to the autobiographer. Reading his work opened my eyes to what should have been patently obvious, namely that the writing of a master’s thesis on a subject of personal philosophical, theological, and religious significance is a profoundly solitary act with many parallels to documenting the story of one’s own life. In many ways it mirrors—in a small way—the anchoritic withdrawal from society. Above all the production of a cogent paper of satisfactory depth and breadth takes time. That time cannot by definition be shared time. Rather it must be time dedicated solely to reading, taking copious notes, and writing. It must be time away from people and other pursuits.

Initially in my specific case, I felt some resentment that after so many years of struggling to complete a degree, work full-time, and raise a family, I should be faced with what seemed the gargantuan hurdle of producing a minimum of eighty pages on

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2 Prayer composed by the author while on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Trappist, Kentucky, 7 September 2001.
anchoritism and Gospel ethics. I chafed that the amount of time I spent on the paper could be better spent in exercise, in doing schoolwork for my job as a teacher, in time with my wife and children, in time with God in prayer and meditation. Georgetown faculty had elected me to the National Honor Society for Theology and Religious Studies! Wasn’t that enough? After fuming about this for a while, I stopped acting like a child and realized the obvious: the production of this paper could become—in fact, should become—a devotion. It should become a form of prayer. It should become a Lenten offering. Truth be told, and seen aright, it already was.

Like any withdrawal into solitude, the writing of this paper was an opportunity to see more clearly the purpose of my life. Not that I am destined to write master’s theses for the rest of my days, rather I am meant to do those things that wholehearted and passionate engagement of this project entails: I am meant to fully embrace the opportunities for academic and personal growth that are presented to me. I am meant to cooperate with others in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. I am meant to utilize my intellectual gifts—such as they are—to the best of my ability. I am meant to keep my word and meet my obligations. I am meant to explore, to wonder, to inquire, and to learn. These are aspects of living a holy life revealed to me by mediation and solitude. I did not need to go to a cave or some other remote hermitage. I did not need to
“withdraw” for weeks or months or in any long-term way. I only needed to go to the library and be still for a few hours and write.

This is not to say that the production of any sort of work under profound time pressure is a simple and enjoyable thing. In some small way, we can liken it to the struggles of Anthony or any of the anchorites as they wrestled with the obstacles to their own holiness. Granted the stakes are much higher when a life of communion with God is at stake, but the act of writing a paper of this scope still takes some of the self-knowledge, self-discipline, and indeed prayer, necessary for the eremitic life.

By and large, human beings seem genetically predisposed to seek pleasure and avoid pain. In this Anthony and I are the same. However, people are also creatures of habit and take well to training. It is in this, or rather the specifics of this, that Anthony and I differ. He was much more accomplished as a self-disciplinarian. He had trained himself, with God’s help, to deny his baser appetites for a greater good. This is the basis of the ethical life. Indeed, one of Anthony’s most profound legacies is his example from which we all can learn. For as much as we may seem to want to take the easy path, we are ultimately far more satisfied when we meet our obligations and do as we should. Then our authentic and meaningful accomplishments free us from more ephemeral temptations that offer no lasting satisfaction.
One of the key lessons I have learned from my experience is that time alone, i.e., solitude, can be profoundly powerful, even in small doses; it needn’t take a long period of isolation to achieve deep insights or revelations. While many writers on the topic, Thomas Merton among them, feel that prolonged isolation is preferable to shorter, more episodic periods of aloneness, they do not hold that the latter is without value. Just as sleep and exercise are supposed to have a cumulative positive effect on the body, e.g., time napping should be added to your night’s sleep for your total hours of rest during the day, or two fifteen minute periods of exercise are equivalent to one thirty minute period, so too do stolen moments of solitude add up. This is an important realization for the practitioner who is trying to establish a practice of daily meditation or solitude but can’t seem to find enough contiguous minutes.

In fact, in the production of this paper, periods of intellectual “dryness” were often remedied by very short periods of prayer or meditation. When I would come to a difficult transition or complex point, I would often hit “Save” and stop typing. Closing my eyes, I would try to think of nothing but a single prayer word, following the technique of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and later Centering Prayer. More often than not, a new idea or way of framing a concept would bubble up to the surface of my consciousness. Not always fully formed, it would nonetheless be enough of a catalyst for me to continue.
One of the most desirable byproducts of solitude can be a sense that events and priorities have come into proper perspective and balance with one another. The world is no longer hurried or manic. Things have slowed down, and the pace of life now makes sense. In all my reading, I have never found any hermit describe his experience as boring, instead time expands to allow room for everyday actions to become sacramental, to become vehicles for grace. The anchorite can experience walking, eating, working, and sitting as prayer. I can experience writing the same way.
CHAPTER 2
RUNNING TO, NOT FROM:
EXAMPLES OF WITHDRAWAL IN RECENT FILM

Apart from all, to all we are united, for it is in the name of all that we present ourselves to the living God.

—Statutes of the Carthusian Order 34.2

Philip Gröning’s landmark film *Into Great Silence* is valuable in two profound ways. First, it is a stunningly beautiful visual record of the lives of Carthusian monks. Carthusians are a unique order in that their rule—or way of life—attempts to occupy a middle ground between an anchoritic and cenobitic existence. Carthusian monks spend the bulk of their day in solitude in their cells. However, they also have a rich communal life that involves praying the divine office, attending Mass and the abbot’s convocations, and even taking hikes and other “field trips” away from the monastery grounds with each other. Gröning’s documentary simply and powerfully captures the lives of these monks.

Second, and amazingly enough, the film not only records the environment and practices of these men as they attempt to meditate on God and do His will, it also manages to transport the viewer into the state of contemplation that these Carthusians strive to create. By watching the film, the receptive viewer actually achieves—at least fleetingly—the sense of balance, grace, and prayerful living I refer to above. (Rest assured that the non-receptive viewer more than likely achieves nothing but boredom.)
Watching this film about contemplative life manages to become an act of contemplative living. Again there is no need to retire to a refuge in the Siberian forests or the Egyptian wastelands. Even a weekend retreat at a local monastery is unnecessary; solitude and many, if not all, of its benefits await in the DVD player. This remarkable transformative power of Gröning’s film truly illustrates that the power of solitude is all around. One must only to stop to notice it. The seeker can indeed be an anchorite in the city if he chooses. In fact, that just may be the best sort of anchorite to be.

The Carthusian Order is more than nine-hundred years old. Not much has changed in that time, yet they do maintain a simple but very rich website. On a page called “The Carthusian Path,” in a section entitled “In the Heart of the Church and of the World” they divide the Carthusian calling into four parts: Praise, Intercession, Witness, and Penance. The Praise section says this:

The Carthusian did not choose solitude for its own sake, but because he saw in it an excellent means for him to attain a deeper union with God and all mankind. It is upon entering the recesses of his heart that the Carthusian solitaries become, in Christ, present to all men. He becomes a solitary to attain solidarity. Contemplatives are at the heart of the Church. They fulfil [sic] an essential function in the ecclesiastical community: the glorification of God. Carthusians withdraw to the desert first and foremost to worship God, to praise him, to admire him, to be seduced by him, to give themselves to him, in the name of all of mankind. It is in the name of all that they are mandated by the Church to be a permanent prayer. (The Carthusian Order n.d.) (their emphasis)
Here we must draw an important distinction which is reemphasized later in our conversation with Brother Xavier, a hermit in the New Mexico wilderness: the text does not read, “It is in the name of all that they are mandated by the Church to pray permanently.” Rather these monks are to be prayer. Their lives should become a single continuous prayer for the benefit of all human beings. They are meant to be transformed.

This transformation has as its purpose the four sections mentioned above. First, God is praised by the transformed monk. Second, the monk’s continual prayer intercedes for all, “Since the very beginning the Church recognized that monks tied to contemplation act as intercessors. Representing all of creation, on a daily basis, at all the liturgical offices and during the Eucharistic celebration, they pray for the living and the dead.” (The Carthusian Order n.d.) So both God and God’s creation are constantly at the heart of the Carthusian calling.

Thirdly, the monk stands as a stark witness to an alternative way of life. He indicates that there is another path, another focus, another way of seeing the world.

Turned, by our profession, solely toward Him who is, we are witness in face of a world engrossed in the earthly realities that outside of Him there is no God. Our life shows that the good from heaven is already to be found on earth; it is a precursor of the resurrection and like an anticipation of a renewed world. (Statutes 34.3)
For the solitaries, being such a witness is not realized by speech, nor by personal contact. By his mere presence, the monk is a witness that God lives and can take over the hearts of men. (The Carthusian Order n.d.)

The monk is a sign. His very existence indicates that God’s love can be so powerful that a man or woman can respond to it completely, and that the transformation it can effect can be total. As an aside, we cannot ignore that the Carthusian does indeed witness via “personal contact” with his fellow monks. We acknowledge that this is not his primary method of witness, yet it is a critical one.

Lastly, the Carthusian order teaches that their ascetic life has a penitential value. Again, not just for them, but for all. This, in my reading, is not a “woe is me” sort of martyrdom. Instead, it is the joyous act of relieving a fellow traveler from some small part of his burden, saying with a smile, “Here, friend. Let me carry that for you.”

For our penance we take part in the redemptive role of Christ. He saved mankind, captive and burdened by sin, especially through his prayer to the Father, and by his death; by forcing ourselves to be associated with this most profound aspect of the redemption, and in spite of our apparent lack of outside activity, we exercise this apostolate in the most immediate way. (Statutes 34.4) (The Carthusian Order n.d.)

Like Anthony, these monks relinquish their claim on earthly indulgence for the sake of the world. They withdraw into liminality, losing their lives in order that all of humanity might live.
 Granted, much of Carthusian life is only meaningful within a Christian hermeneutic; to imagine otherwise would be illogical. However, there is a vital aspect of these monks’ lives that has universal meaning: their corporate existence.

Carthusian originality comes, in second part, from the community aspect which is intrinsically linked in the solitary aspect. This was St. Bruno's stroke of genius, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to have been able, from its very inception, to balance in just the right proportions solitary life and community life in such a way as to allow the Carthusians to be a communion of solitaries for God. Solitude and brotherly life balance themselves perfectly.

Community life becomes concrete in the liturgy sung at the church, and by weekly meetings of the community on Sunday, during lunch in silence at the refectory and in the afternoon during the bimonthly recreation. In other words, on the first day of the week a long hike of approximately four hours (the spaciement) occurs in which we can talk to better get to know one another. These recreations and hike have the goal of maintaining mutual affection and helping unite the hearts . . . .

(The Carthusian Order n.d.) (their emphasis)

In the end, what could be more desirable than human beings filled with affection and love, both for those around them and for the whole world?

Throughout the tradition, solitude or the anchoritic calling of the sort described above has been viewed as monasticism’s “major leagues.” A solitary life was only to be entered into after a prospective hermit had built his skills of meditation, prayer, and love of God and others in a cenobitic setting. The prospect of the untrained battling alone against the demons of loneliness, lust, and doubt likely meant a descent into madness.
Even today, once a hermit withdraws, he is often beholden to his monastery for meals, supplies, and the sacraments. Again the split between anchorite and a larger society of some sort is ultimately an incomplete one.

Dangerous too is a solitary life undertaken for the wrong reasons. Merton writes extensively about how the vocation must be true, that becoming a monastic to run from something is dangerous and doomed to failure. Ultimately, any running must be a running to, not away. Anger with the world, judgment of others, condemnation of society, all are illegitimate reasons to withdraw. Instead, love of God and love of fellow man must be the motivation, not escape.

It is also the case that a prospective monk—and certainly a prospective hermit—cannot will himself a vocation. By definition, a vocation calls a man or woman out of his or her current existence and into a new one. A vocation is recognized and received only through the prayerful and quiet act of discernment. The solitary life cannot be entered into by an act of will, but only by invitation.

To see a modern example of solitude gone awry—solitude entered into wrongheadedly—we need only look at the example of young Christopher McCandless whose story was first popularized by the 1996 book entitled Into the Wild by Jon Krakauer. The story was more recently made into a 2007 film of the same name by director Sean Penn.
In the original article that would grow into the book, Krakauer wrote the following for *Outside* magazine:

Off the southeastern coast of Iceland sits a low barrier island called Papos. Treeless and rocky, perpetually knocked by gales howling off the North Atlantic, the island takes its name from its first settlers, now long gone, the Irish monks known as *papar*. They arrived as early as the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., having sailed and rowed from the western coast of Ireland. Setting out in small open boats called curraghs, made from cowhide stretched over light wicker frames, they crossed one of the most treacherous stretches of ocean in the world without knowing what they'd find on the other side.

The papar risked their lives—and lost them in untold droves—but not in the pursuit of wealth or personal glory or to claim new lands in the name of a despot. As the great Arctic explorer Fridtjof Nansen points out, they undertook their remarkable voyages "chiefly from the wish to find lonely places, where these anchorites might dwell in peace, undisturbed by the turmoil and temptations of the world." When the first handful of Norwegians showed up on the shores of Iceland in the ninth century, the papar decided the country had become too crowded, even though it was still all but uninhabited. They climbed back into their curraghs and rowed off toward Greenland. They were drawn west across the storm-wracked ocean, past the edge of the known world, by nothing more than hunger of the spirit, a queer, pure yearning that burned in their souls.

Reading of these monks, one is struck by their courage, their reckless innocence, and the intensity of their desire. And one can't help thinking of Chris McCandless. (Krakauer 1993a)

On the surface Chris McCandless seems much like the papar. The problem is one of motivation. McCandless fled society because he perceived it as toxic. He fled his family in anger and mistrust. His project was not to grow closer to God and ultimately become a conduit for God’s love in the world, but only to reveal his true self to himself; a
solipsistic goal at best or a masturbatory exercise in selfishness at worst. Signing his pseudonym, McCandless whittled the following into a board. The makeshift plaque was found in the abandoned bus he used as a base of operations in the Alaskan backcountry:

Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, 'cause "the West is the best." And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the Great White North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild.

Alexander Supertramp
May 1992 (Krakauer 1993b)

It seems though that McCandless’s experiment—originally entered into for reasons that are antithetical to the eremitic vocation—ultimately became a vehicle for grace. What changed? Because of a terrible and irreversible mistake, McCandless was faced with his immanent and unavoidable demise. Confusing two similar looking plants in his field guide, McCandless ate some poisonous seeds that inexorably shut down his digestive system. There was no remedy. Too weak to hike out, he waited for death. Krakauer writes:

From August 13 through 18 his journal records nothing beyond a tally of the days. At some point during this week, he tore the final page from Louis L'Amour's memoir, Education of a Wandering Man. On one side were some lines that L'Amour had quoted from Robinson Jeffers's poem "Wise Men in Their Bad Hours":

[Quoted text from Robinson Jeffers's poem]

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(Sources: Krakauer 1993a, 1993b)
Death's a fierce meadowlark: but to die having made
Something more equal to the centuries
Than muscle and bone, is mostly to shed weakness.

On the other side of the page, which was blank, McCandless penned a brief adios: "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!"

Then he crawled into the sleeping bag his mother had made for him and slipped into unconsciousness. He probably died on August 18, 113 days after he'd walked into the wild, 19 days before six hunters and hikers would happen across the bus and discover his body inside.

One of his last acts was to take a photograph of himself, standing near the bus under the high Alaskan sky, one hand holding his final note toward the camera lens, the other raised in a brave, beatific farewell. He is smiling in the photo, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God. (Krakauer 1993c)

Perhaps in the end, Chris McCandless was able to see things aright. Trapped in a terrible set of circumstances, he had the better part of three weeks to come to terms with the choices he had made: disappearing without contacting his parents or sister for years, harboring strong feelings of anger and resentment towards his family and society at large, taking no steps towards reconciliation and forgiveness with those he felt had wronged him. It must have been terrible, yet perhaps precisely because of his dire situation—at least in Krakauer’s telling—McCandless was ultimately able to listen and hear the God who ceaselessly and mercifully calls His children home. In the end—as He has done with so many lives—God may have saved Chris McCandless from himself.
From the time of the pre-Socratic philosophers, thinkers have argued for a mean to be struck as human beings attempt to lead “worthy” lives. There has always been a tension between theory and praxis. Rigorous practitioners of the life well-led have rarely held that it is enough to navel-gaze one’s way to virtue. On the contrary, whatever wisdom was accrued “on the mountaintop” was meant for application “in the valley.” Upon becoming enlightened, the philosopher was obligated both to apply and disseminate his hard-won wisdom in the community at large. So it is with the eremitic monastic. As devoutly as he may initially wish to the contrary, if he does not return to a life in communion with others, others will seek him out. This is one of the paradoxical mysteries inherent in Christian life and teaching. Ironically, in solitude the monk can most completely become a conduit through which God’s love can reach other men.

The faith teaches all Christians that only in death is life to be found, and only in humility are they exalted; so too monks learn that in obedience is freedom, and the anchorite specifically realizes that in isolation and withdrawal comes profound hospitality. The lives of the Desert Mothers and Fathers relate dozens of instances when pilgrims, seekers, and their fellow monks disrupt the solitude of the holy men and women repeatedly. The intrusion, the trespass, is of course forgiven and the abbas and ammas provide the ear and counsel the people seek. This is never done begrudgingly out of a sense of duty, but with a radiant sense of Christian joy. These holy men and
women have long ago realized that their repeated deaths to self have provided them with life abundant. They freely share the living waters of the wellspring of solitude. There is no longer a dialectical strain between solitude and periods of life in community. The one serves the other. The mean is struck. God’s will be done.

Perhaps the two authors who most clearly relate how this occurs are the Anglo/American monk and scholar, Thomas Merton, and a much more obscure English Benedictine abbot named Aelred Carlyle. Merton in his inspired, Thoughts in Solitude, and Carlyle in his equally beautiful, Our Purpose and Method, lay out precisely how the monastic charism generally—and the eremitic life specifically—serve the Body of Christ in profound and irreplaceable ways.
CHAPTER 3

ORA ET LABORA: AELRED CARLYLE ON
THE MONASTIC GIFT TO GOD AND THE WORLD

... the Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teachings. Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service.

—From the Prologue to The Rule of St. Benedict

Dom Carlyle lays out a simple, passionate, and eloquent defense of monasticism. He begins by asking his reader, “What is the fundamental principle underlying your life” (Carlyle 1987, 1)? What an extraordinary query. How should we respond? If it takes us much time at all to arrive at our answer, if something doesn’t leap to mind almost immediately, can our foundation, our “core belief” really have true meaning? What criteria should we use to gauge the centrality of a given principle in our lives?

The Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset suggests mental energy and focus. He writes, “Tell me to what you pay attention, and I will tell you who you are.” So who or what is the focus of our attention? Family? Career? Acquisition? Pleasure? For the monastic the answer is clearly and completely, God. Dom Carlyle writes: “The purpose which the Religious Life has in view is the highest possible: for it is a Response to the call of Almighty God to live in eternal relations with Him, and through Him, with men and all things” (Carlyle 1987, 1). Here, succinctly, the Abbot has captured the
central idea indeed. As the monk responds to the loving call of God and enters into communion with the divine, he enters into communion with the rest of creation. Love of God engenders profound love for the works of God’s hands. An opening of one’s heart to God opens that heart to the world. A true anchoritic vocation—responded to in love—could never produce some sort of emotionally distant curmudgeon who guarded his solitude jealously. True love of God cannot be divorced from the love of all He has made. The monk is paradoxically and completely a man of the people, a man of the world.

Later the Abbot asks the reader to enter into a thought experiment. What would happen, he asks, if it were certain that the second coming of Christ would occur this Christmas? He posits that many people would act differently, that their behavior would look more like the religious life (Carlyle 1987, 8).

[Religious Life] is the acceptance complete and whole-hearted of the claim the creator makes upon His creature, the acknowledgment that this present life is only a short passage to the next, which is our true life, and the consequent ordering of our existence here, so that we drop out of it so far as we are able all that will have to be dropped at the hour of our death; that only being kept which is to last forever. (Carlyle 1987, 1)

So the monk, with God’s help, uses the fires of devotion, prayer, and love in an attempt to burn away the dross and distractions of earthly life. Heavy sledding, indeed. And not for everyone.
Dom Carlyle makes it clear that this vocation is rare, but those for whom it is genuine cannot ignore it. To do so would be to violate the will of God. Clearly from Holy Scripture, the testimony of the past, and knowledge of human character, most men and women are not called to the cloister, but to live in the world and therein to find their right place. But it is equally clear that some are called to the forsaking of all things for the love of Christ, and such must obey what they calmly and deliberately believe to be the distinct call of God to them. Even if no apparent good came of this renunciation still the cloistered life would be the only right life for those for whom God has willed it. (Carlyle 1987, 5)

Clearly Dom Carlyle hints that there is a “good” to the life of renunciation beyond its fulfillment of God’s plan for an individual monastic. The nature of that benefit he will describe later.

First he describes the nature of this call to religious life, setting it against the behaviors of the “sleepwalking” sorts of Christians so offensive to Kierkegaard. The monastic in a sense awakens and realizes his or her need to pray to God unceasingly.

The Christian obligations common to all men are by God’s Will quickened into vigorous force in the Religious Life, and what is often to many an illusive and unsubstantial ideal becomes to others a solid actuality: that which is today so often the Sunday pastime of the unthinking Christian becomes the everyday employment, the joyous occupation of a lifetime. (Carlyle 1987, 8)

For the monastic, weekly Mass is not enough. Being a daily communicant is not enough. For these believers bathed in a sea of divine love, the clarion call to join in deeper communion with that love echoing in their hearts, the only response is to dedicate one’s life to the praise and service of God.
Dom Carlyle continues, “The Religious vow is to us the extension or rather the fulfillment of the vows of our Baptism” (Carlyle 1987, 7). In the Abbot’s view the monastic life is the logical culmination of a life given in infancy to God. “By creation (God) redemption (Jesus) and sanctification (Holy Spirit) we are entirely God’s. . .not our own, we are bought with a price” (Carlyle 1987, 5). Devoting a life—that in a fundamental way belongs to God in the first place—to the worship and service of God is a completely reasonable and coherent decision. In fact, it would be far stranger, far more arrogant and prideful to do otherwise.

It is critical here that we draw a distinction between those who attempt to live holy lives, responding to a vocation to bear Christian witness in the world, and those who flee and hide from God in the many distractions of secular life. The former is a vital and important calling; the latter is a turning away from our highest purpose. Abbot Carlyle makes clear that genuine worldly vocations serve to build the Kingdom of God as well:

Thus there is no invidious contrast between the Religious and secular states. God is supreme and although some are called to forsake all to follow Christ, while others are bidden to remain in the world and yet not of it, both states are equally in accordance with His will, and in both must His will be done, and His glory set forth. (Carlyle 1987, 11)
Provided that those who have chosen to live in the world maintain their focus on Christ’s example, trying the best they can to live lives of service and love, they too can contribute to peace in the world as their monastic brethren do, albeit in a different way.

It is clear then that the monastic is motivated by a sense of duty to God and a sense of responding to God’s infinite love. To the outside observer in whom these things are missing, the monastic vocation appears a wrongheaded squandering of human potential. Carlyle writes:

> The principle of the religious life is therefore true in conception and in essence: it is a glad and free service because it is responsive to love. Quite unlike this is the world’s conception of it. People say that it is false in principle because it is untrue to nature, and the reply is obvious, in Saint Paul’s words, ‘But the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.’ (1 Corinthians, ii, 14) Spiritual things are to these people a sheer waste of time, and to them the consecrated life must indeed seem a dismal affair, bound by arbitrary rules, a barren, wasted life. (Carlyle 1987, 6)

With no sense of the love of God and the obligation felt as one of His children, the “glad and free service,” “the joyous occupation of a lifetime” seems a dead-end trap, a profound error in judgment, a wrongheaded choice.

Both Dom Carlyle and Merton, as we will see, take pains to establish time and again that the monastic life is not chosen by the monk. As the term “vocation” makes clear, it is a “calling.” The monk is slowly, quietly invited to this life. “No man can give himself a vocation or make himself a Religious, it is God’s call upon which all depends.
‘Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you’” (Carlyle 1987, 14). A monk cannot will himself into this life; in fact, it would be a recipe for failure.

The monk must understand himself to be bidden by God. Successful withdrawal comes about as a response to an invitation, acquiescence to a will and wisdom far greater than our own. How can the monk be sure the invitation is a valid one? Certainty—to the extent such a thing is possible—comes about only as the result of much prayer and reflection, what the tradition calls discernment.

Monastic life. . .is the reflection and imitation of the example which our Lord Himself set us. . .for it is a return to the First Principles of Primitive Christianity. It is the literal, sober, and conscientious interpretation in everyday life of the Divine Counsels. . .the downright conviction of doing God’s will. (Carlyle 1987, 14)

Clearly the monk models himself after the best Christian exemplar there is: Jesus, but the rest of this passage—particularly the “downright conviction” part—sounds a bit mad. Indeed it might; monks, and especially hermits, are “fools for Christ” in the sense that the choice they have made is profoundly countercultural, and by worldly measures seems illogical and perhaps bordering on insanity.

Obviously though, monks and hermits are not mentally ill. The Abbot continues in an attempt to clarify:

A man does not become a Religious to escape the responsibilities of ordinary family life, but that he may accept the saying of our Lord which all cannot receive to remain unwedded for the kingdom of heaven’s sake (Matthew XIX, 11, 12). . .In short it is not religious eccentricity, but it is religious concentration according to the Will of God, and not something
that we are to choose or wish for in order that we may please ourselves. (Carlyle 1987, 14)

And so we return full circle to the “everyday employment, the joyous occupation of a lifetime.” Monastics have answered what they prayerfully perceive as an invitation to praise God and work for the establishment of His kingdom on a full-time basis. This becomes their job, their career. The abbot writes, “The primary work of our community. . .is prayer” (Carlyle 1987, 18). Hermits and cloistered monks are professional “prayers” who understand their work to have vital intercessory value for all humankind and all the world. In the end, this is one of their greatest achievements and contributions.

In a beautiful summary, the Abbot explains the complementary nature of the Active and Contemplative life and points to the narrative Jesus as the exemplar of both:

There is plenty of activity in the Church, and with all our hearts we thank God for it, but what we want to do, with His help, is to stand as it were silently behind that activity—if you will apart from that activity—supporting it with our prayers, offering to God in our daily offices all the efforts that are being made to Him, like Moses of old on the Mount, with hands upheld in intercession for those who are actively engaged in the noble and trying work of meeting the enemy in the field, and struggling with the attacks of evil which are ever assaulting the children of God. The Church is called the Body of Christ, and must therefore strive to be like Him in all respects. His life affords us an example of the perfect combination of these two elements of the spiritual life, namely the Active and the Contemplative. While His days were devoted to teaching, healing the sick and His manifold works of mercy among those whom He came to save, the other aspect of that life is represented by those thirty hidden years of silence, by the solitary struggle with the great enemy of God during the forty days in the wilderness, and by the whole nights spent in agonizing prayer to His Father. If the Church does not reproduce the life of her Lord in this its
twofold aspect, we have no right to be surprised if her influence suffers. There is real and positive good in the Religious Life, whether Active or Contemplative. The merest human perception of the natural man can see good in the work of the active Religious. It needs the keener perception of the spiritual man to realize the intense power that is wielded by prayer—the spiritual force which is brought into action by unbroken intercourse with God, by those who, however imperfectly, put themselves into touch with our Lord’s present work, and unite all their spiritual energies with Him Who is the Great Intercessor.

To decry the cloistered life as selfish, useless, wasted, is to impugn the worth of our Blessed Lord’s pleading before the Father, and to bid Him to come down from His place at the right hand of God, where He ever liveth to make intercession for us, to tend to the bodily wants of men. (Carlyle 1987, 18-19)

For Abbot Carlyle then, there are two sets of Gospel ethics, both of which are vitally important to Christian life, both of which must be practiced constantly by the faithful. One governs interactions with fellow men, one governs the dependent relationship with He who knows us so intimately that He has counted the hairs of our head (Luke 12:7).

The Abbot’s position no doubt resonates with those who believe that the latter relationship exists, yet it rings hollow for those who do not. He concedes that recognizing the benefits of the contemplative life requires “the keener perception of the spiritual man.” This seems to indicate that non-believers are able to dismiss the eremitic vocation as worthless.

While I, as a Christian, subscribe to the Abbot’s argument in toto, I propose in the following pages that both the hermit and cloistered monk are inseparably bound to their fellow men in profoundly practical ways as well. I hope to show that the nature of
this bond—while made infinitely deeper and more meaningful by prayer and a recognition of dependence on God—has genuine value from even the most areligious of perspectives.
CHAPTER 4
TOUCHING THE FACE OF GOD:
BELDEN LANE AND THE SOLACE OF FIERCE LANDSCAPES

I know who it is that I have put my trust in. I am certain that he, the just Judge, is able to take care of all that I have entrusted to him until the last day.

O God, you are my God, I watch for you from the dawn.
My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you.
I came to your sanctuary, as one in a parched and waterless land, so that I could see your might and your glory.
My lips will praise you, for your mercy is better than life itself.

Psalm 62 (63)
Thirsting for God

Enthusiastically and eloquently, Belden Lane examines the attraction of the desolate and empty places where God seems most consistently and clearly revealed to those who are receptive. In his work, The Solace of Fierce Landscapes, Lane lays out what exactly draws the faithful to the harsh environments where it is easiest to “be still and confess that I am God!” (USCCB - NAB - Psalm 46 2002)

Professor Frederick J. Ruf of Georgetown University has done a great deal of work on how movement into liminal space—that is those “in-between” places where human beings are marginalized and not comfortable, where they have no sense of belonging or being “at home”—leads to religious behavior. His inquiry has focused on pilgrimage and travel, but is applicable here.

It is one of the greatest religious paradoxes that the places where human beings time and again have intimate and powerful encounters with the divine are, at their
essence, hostile and bleak. Barren, austere, and forbidding, these spaces are voids into which religious adepts willingly go. Abraham on Mount Moriah, Moses on Mount Sinai, Jesus in the wilderness, Muhammad in the hardscrabble caves above Mecca, all of these men meet God in deserted, isolated, and liminal hinterlands. In nothingness they find everything. It begs the question, “How?”

Initially when seekers enter these spaces, they encounter what Lane calls divine indifference. At first encounter, neither the desert nor the craggy mountain peaks give them any sense that one puny man or woman is worth an iota of Godly energy. They find themselves painfully aware that these places are concerned neither with their survival nor their perishing. These spaces will exist as they have for millennia; they are completely unresponsive to human presence or absence. Lane writes, “The austere, unaccommodating landscapes of desert, mountain, and heath recall once again the smallness of self and the majesty of Being” (Lane 2007, 53). Many may agree with the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and acknowledge that the world is indeed “charged with the grandeur of God,” however, it appears at first blush that the grandeur takes no notice of people at all.

This indifference is, of course, attractive. Paradoxically, it is part of human nature to be drawn to that which seems to have no interest in it. One need only look at some large percentage of adolescent crushes to see this law in effect. Lane writes, “People are sometimes pulled both spiritually and geographically to that which most
ignores them” (Lane 2007, 52). Lane calls this “the aseity of God,” which “[has] as its goal the ultimate attraction of that which it initially repels” (Lane 2007, 53). Like some sort of silent siren, divine indifference pulls us closer until we can see it for what it truly is: love in disguise.

Initially though such indifference serves, at the very least, to put human concerns into perspective. When a seeker mindfully encounters an ocean, a sunset, a mountain range, a desert cliff, a primeval forest, his cares are placed in a temporal and consequential context. Examined against these natural phenomena and their relative immutability, he rightfully can perceive the challenges and suffering present in his life as fleeting and minor. Human problems do not affect the tides, the setting of the sun, the location and shape of a summit or rock wall, the existence of an old-growth tree that has stood for fifty generations. These vast-scale testaments to processes and powers upon which human lives ultimately depend serve to draw the faithful out of themselves, force them to think of the world as an infinitely wider place than just the locus of their worries and fears.

In a real sense, this divine indifference reorients the faithful. It forces seekers of God to see that they—and their problems—are not the center of existence. Lane writes:

The people of these faiths [Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism] formed by mountains, desert and rough terrain, celebrate oddly enough, a sense of God’s indifference to all the assorted hand-wringing anxieties of human life. . . .they undercut altogether the incessant self-absorption that preoccupies the American mind. . . .it comes as a strange freshness to be
confronted by an unfathomable God, indifferent to the petty self-conscious needs that consume us. (Lane 2007, 52-53)

This is not to say that God does not care about human beings—for all of these traditions teach that God does deeply—but rather it indicates that God does not want human lives to be wrongly focused, needlessly devoted to matters of little consequence.

The greatest gift these environments give the faithful is their disregard. Lane relates the story of the English author Andrew Harvey who had an epiphany while hiking through Tibetan high country to visit Buddhist monasteries. Hungry for a “Great Experience” of enlightenment, a bolt from the Himalayan blue—or something equally grand in scope—he realized one afternoon what the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has known for decades: namely that being profoundly attendant to the present moment is to become enlightened, to achieve heaven, to touch the face of God. Lane quotes Harvey:

... to walk by a stream, watching the pebbles darken in the running water, is enough; to sit under the apricots is enough; to sit in a circle of great red rocks, watching them slowly begin to throb and dance as the silence of my mind deepens, is enough. ... The things that ignore us save us in the end. (Lane 2007, 54.)

Harvey realizes that the natural world is a powerful conduit of grace, and the reception of grace cannot be forced. It is, in fact, a gift given perpetually if the seeker stops struggling to grasp it. Again Christian paradox reigns. The faithful need only to slow down and silence themselves for “a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing,” to be poured into their laps (Luke 6:38).
The most critical attributes of these harsh locales—if they are to be ultimately worthwhile in the discernment of God’s love—is their desolation, emptiness, nothingness. They are voids. They foster, perhaps demand, silent introspection at best and a descent into madness at worst. The devoted seeker never enters these liminal spaces with company. To do so detracts from their emptiness. While he or she may consult an authority on spiritual exercise either before departure or upon return, the withdrawal itself must happen alone in order to be fruitful. Then, with a minimum of external distraction, the seeker can begin her attempt to encounter God.

Time and again the tradition demonstrates that solitude does not obviate struggle; internal distractions represent significant hurdles in their own right. In fact, isolation and its potentially attendant loneliness, fear, and doubt greatly intensifies the challenge faced by the spiritual athlete. Athanasius describes the torments endured by Anthony as he battled demons alone:

And when the enemy could not endure it, but was even fearful that in a short time Antony would fill the desert with the discipline, coming one night with a multitude of demons, he so cut him with stripes that he lay on the ground speechless from the excessive pain. For he affirmed that the torture had been so excessive that no blows inflicted by man could ever have caused him such torment . . . and the demons as if breaking the four walls of the dwelling seemed to enter through them, coming in the likeness of beasts and creeping things. And the place was on a sudden filled with the forms of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, serpents, asps, scorpions, and wolves, and each of them was moving according to his nature. The lion was roaring, wishing to attack, the bull seeming to toss with its horns, the serpent writhing but unable to approach, and the wolf
as it rushed on was restrained; altogether the noises of the apparitions, with their angry ragings, were dreadful. But Antony, stricken and goaded by them, felt bodily pains severer still. (Athanasius 1998)

This is spiritual combat of the most frightening sort. While the demons of the fourth century desert took the form of fierce predators, the metaphor is clear. Because the solitary is alone, he is dependent on the grace of God to overcome his greatest fears.

Provided the adept can negotiate the hazards of the solitary life in these hostile locales, he will be able to benefit from its greatest gift: silence. For mystics of nearly every theistic tradition, silence is the *sine qua non* of encountering divine love. In his remarkable film on the Carthusian order, Philip Gröning includes inter-titles between scenes. One of the most instructive is 1 Kings 19:11-12:

> A strong and heavy wind was rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the LORD—but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake—but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was fire—but the LORD was not in the fire. After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound. (U.S Catholic Bishops - New American Bible n.d.)

This is the NAB version of the passage the King James more famously concludes with the “still small voice.” Other biblical versions call it “a gentle air” or “a soft breath,” perhaps like the one that animated Adam (*1 Kings 19:12*. 2004-2009). Regardless, it is in this faint divine murmur where Elijah finds God.

Again paradoxically, the mighty God of Abraham—deliverer of the Israelites, vanquisher of the Egyptians—has the voice and respiration of a child. The point is clear. In the clamor and chaos of modern life, the seeker will never hear the tiny whisper that
perpetually calls him home. Only if the faithful quiet themselves and establish a practice of listening, will they perceive the constant vocation to enter into communion with God.

Since the mountaintop and desert cave are unavailable to him in the St. Louis suburbs, Lane is in the habit of crawling into a sleeping bag in his backyard and meditating on the night sky. Not surprisingly he finds what he calls his “ersatz desert,” a reasonable facsimile of the necessary void:

None of the solicitudes of the day seem nearly as significant in the backyard under the stars at night. There I can yield more readily to the same will of God to which the night also abandons itself. A deep desire surfaces there, to be present to the night and to the God who hides, like the Song of Song’s elusive lover, within it.

God’s indifference to all the cares brought with me from the day’s events—an indifference mediated through the dark, slim images of night—makes possible a lighter touch on everything I’d considered important. It draws me out of myself into an indifference of my own, an ability to remain neutral and unruffled before all the various obsessions of the day. (Lane 2007, 58)

Note that Lane describes a “lesser” and “greater” benefit here. The lesser benefit—which is a significant benefit nonetheless—is the perspective and equanimity vis a vis the events of their lives, which the faithful gain as external indifference seems to travel almost by osmosis to the interior life. The greater benefit is the realization that osmosis is not at work here, nor is indifference ultimately. The greater benefit is an understanding that this new equanimity is merely a by-product or symptom of being gently embraced by the “elusive lover.” For it is the first hand experience of the still small voice, the tiny whisper, the soft breath, that has given a new perspective, the
ability to see various states of affairs as they really are, the realization of true selves and rightful priorities.

Still, the seeker may not understand. Just as they can apprehend the effects of the wind—branches, leaves, sailboats, etc., blown about—but not the wind itself, so too can they experience the incalculably peaceful calming and orienting effect of these divine butterfly kisses while not understanding their origin much at all. Lane writes, “The power of [these] encounter[s]...is found in the fact that what is met can’t be named...In the end, I suspect, that’s what pulls me irresistibly to God, finding myself speechless before a mystery I’m able to love though never fully comprehend” (2007, 59). A cloud of unknowing, indeed.

The tradition of apophatic theology, from the Greek for “to say no,” concludes that the faithful must be humble and guarded in their statements about the nature of God. In fact, following the via negativa, or “way of negation” they are likely on firmer ground describing what God is not. Because language is a construct of the human mind invented to describe human thoughts and experiences, it is necessarily limited and ultimately incapable of meaningfully describing the totality of God.

The story of the three blind men and the elephant as a metaphor for three theologians and God is instructive. The first blind man grasps the ear of the elephant and declares that elephants are like giant leaves. The second encircles the elephant’s leg and posits that elephants are like stout trees. The last takes hold of the trunk and argues
that elephants are like large snakes. No man is wrong as far as his simile goes, but none is remotely close to understanding elephant *qua* elephant. The apophatic school acknowledges the inevitable shortcomings and confusion that arise when humans use language to apprehend God and argues that theologians had better stay quiet at the risk of further confounding themselves.

Silent meditation, more accurately called contemplative prayer in the Western Christian tradition, is a practical application of apophatic theology. By sitting in silence, the devotee acknowledges the limits of language in apprehending God. Instead he waits for a direct experience of the divine. Lane writes:

[Practitioners] begin with an embrace of silence—relinquishing language, along with its powers of naming, entitling, and possessing. This leads, in turn, to the letting go of one’s thoughts, the emptying of the self, the act of loving in silent contemplation what cannot be rationally understood, even a new freedom with respect to others and one’s life in the world. (Lane 2007, 66-67)

This loss of self, the falling away of what the tradition calls the “false” self, is key to the mystical experience of God. It allows the apprehension of the tiny whisper, the entrée of the One who knocks so faintly. When the preoccupied self, governed by a frantic mentality the Buddhist texts call “monkey mind,” is finally stilled, it is revealed as fraudulent.

This necessary negation of the false self is often initially frightening. The realization that all the ephemeral ways in which one defined oneself are empty and unsatisfying represents, at first, a profound existential threat. To the person wedded to
their superficial concerns by years of solipsistic thinking, it is terrifying to see that the petty concerns are ultimately meaningless, and the years, in the aggregate, spent dwelling on them was time wasted. (Paradoxically, it is also profoundly emancipating, but we will save that discussion for later.)

The inspired fourteenth century English anchoress, Julian of Norwich, understands this sobering negation as sharing in the humility of God-as-man and His ultimate mortification via the Passion. For Julian, the occasion seen from the proper perspective is a joyous one. In the way God emptied himself as Jesus, first by becoming human and eventually by suffering torture and death, so too are the faithful called to pour themselves out in order to draw closer to Him. Lane writes of Julian:

Yet during this time of utter silence and complete loss of control, she experienced something she would spend the rest of her life trying to describe.

It was an experience of knowing herself as nothing, being wholly stripped of language and identity. Yet this experience-that-was-not-an-experience joined her more closely to Christ than anything she has ever known. It was the deepest participation in his suffering on the cross. In the playfulness of language that came to characterize her subsequent work, she made use of punning word-knots to describe this knowing, noughting, nothing, no thing, this coming to naught in which she found her greatest joy. She understood it as a sharing in the emptiness (the nawtedness) of Jesus. “Thus was our lord Jesus nawted for us, and we stond al in this manner nowtid with hym.” (Lane 2007, 68)

Again Jesus is the exemplar for Christians. Following his model is the key by which the faithful live lives of holiness, drawing into communion with God through their love for their fellow members of the Body of Christ. The key to overcoming struggles with the
demanding ethical norms Jesus taught is the death of the false self. For when the faithful lose their lives, they gain them.

Like Belden Lane, Julian chose to create a working facsimile of a natural wilderness in an urban setting. What she, and the wider tradition of medieval anchoresses developed, was a sort of manmade cave. Frequently, these spiritual athletes would take up residence in a small cell or one-room building on the grounds of—or directly attached to—a church or cathedral. In some cases, they were actually “bricked in” by masons and had their meals and waste passed in and out through narrow passages. They thereby achieved isolation and silence in places and conditions that were at first glance not conducive to either.

The fact that a cadre of people established themselves as the support system of these contemplatives speaks to the import of the latter in the life of the community. Often a given city or faith community would benefit from the reputation of its resident anchorite. The money of pilgrims would flow as spiritual seekers flocked to see the holy woman or man.

One of the greatest paradoxes or ironies of contemplatives—and one that underlies this thesis at its heart—is that the greater a contemplative’s success at achieving union with God and understanding God’s wishes through withdrawal, the more she or he will be sought out by fellow believers. The quandary is that the anchorite will have to relinquish much of the way of life that has taught him so much
about holiness and afforded him consistent experiences of oneness with the divine. In perhaps the ultimate test of Christian selflessness, the anchorite must lose his life with God in a real way. Ultimately though, like Abraham, he will find everything by relinquishing it.

There is a key passage in the Gospel of Mark that describes this tension. Jesus and the apostles are attempting to withdraw for a period of contemplation and rest, but the demands on them are unceasing:

The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught.
He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat.
So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place.
People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them.
When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:30-34)

Quite clearly, the people in their need have violated the solitude Jesus and the Twelve were seeking. Clearly too, Jesus feels that their need trumps his desire for rest and prayer. Again, Christ is the exemplar for all Christians.

There are many stories in the literature of eremitic monks acting in this way. Peter France relates one involving the Orthodox starets Leonid:

When asked one day by a young and pious monk how he could allow his solitude to be destroyed every day by so many people, he replied that his love of neighbor was so great that he could converse with one for two
days together and still not allow the conversation to interrupt his interior prayer. (France 1996, 60)

The Russian startsy were hermit monks who were sought out by people of all social levels for their wisdom and insight. Leonid was one of the greatest, no doubt in large part to his willingness to simply be present and listen.

Thomas Merton is keen on the benefits of listening. It is vital in his relationship with God, “My life is a listening, His is a speaking” (Merton 1999, 69), and with other human beings:

It is not speaking that breaks our silence but the desire to be heard. The words of the proud man impose silence on all others, so that he alone may be heard. The humble man speaks only in order to be spoken to. The humble man asks nothing but an alms, then waits and listens. (Merton 1999, 89)

Once still and silent, the contemplative Christian may better apprehend what is being asked of him, both by the Divine and by his fellow man.

North of Los Alamos, New Mexico near the tiny town of Abiquiu where the painter Georgia O’Keefe lived and worked, a forest road snakes west off Route 84 and follows the Rio Chama for fourteen miles back into a desolate canyon. Nestled there at the foot of a soaring red rock wall is the Monastery of Christ in the Desert. A community of Benedictine monks calls this beautiful isolated spot home. They rise in the pre-dawn darkness to pray the Divine Office, chanting psalms as the sun rises. This is a place of incredible silence and scale, where it is easy to hike a few miles off the
property into the vast neighboring federal wilderness and feel divine indifference in spades.

Attached to this community of the faithful is a hermit named Brother Xavier. The monk lives in a hermitage further up the forest road in a part of the monastery off limits to retreatants. Still, he is eager to come to a public space and meet with visitors. He will sit with them for long periods of time, answering questions about his vocation and way of life. What is almost immediately evident in spending time with Brother Xavier is his abiding sense of humility, peace, and joy. This is a man who believes deeply that God wants him to live in simplicity and be a conduit for His grace.

It is instructive that early in an interview Brother Xavier said, “I can tell you what I live.” He did not say, “I can tell you how I live.” For this man, the “what” dictates the “how.” His life is a long answer to the loving God who calls him into communion. “It’s quite simple really,” he continued. “I try to live in God’s presence and lead where He follows. It’s quite a simple deal if it’s the love of God and your fellow man!”

In this short quotation Brother Xavier reveals four critical aspects of the holy life: simplicity, presence before (and ultimately within) God, submission to God, and loving kindness towards others. Presented this way, the path of holiness is simple in concept, but perhaps difficult in practice. It reminds one of the old ad campaign for the board game, Othello: “A minute to learn, a lifetime to master.”
Brother Xavier’s days are as simple as his philosophy. “I pray the Office by myself. I’m just doing the work of God through prayer.” As he made clear this is not merely a job, it is a life. Xavier, like all monks before him, is a professional intercessory pray-er; his life is a prayer. These men pray up to seven times a day for the benefit of the world. As Jesus petitioned the Father on our behalf, so too do they. Somewhere in the world a monastic community or hermit is (or is about to begin) praying for all of human kind.

As mentioned, Brother Xavier is a bit of a celebrity. Retreatants regularly request to meet with him. For the average contemplative pray-er or person grappling with maintaining a meditation practice, meeting Brother Xavier is like a tee-ball player meeting one of the Boston Red Sox. Despite his vocation, Brother Xavier is always eager to make time for fellow seekers. He says, “I spend time in community, but I am so glad to get back. I don’t want to guard my solitude though. That would be pride and selfishness.” While it is obvious that he prefers being alone with God, it is also clear to him that love should be his guide and the desire for divine union should not be an occasion of sin. No doubt he recognizes that such union can come either in the solitary practice of contemplative prayer or in the mindful attention to fellow children of God.

Xavier believes that the circuitous and halting path he took to becoming a hermit has been a blessing. It has taken years for him and others to slowly understood and confirm his rare vocation. He believes that the calling might have been more difficult
had he actively sought it, but it was more a case of superiors recognizing the vocation in him. Clearly his detachment and trust in providence smoothed a bumpy road to solitude. Perhaps the faithful might keep this in mind when expecting God to move at their pace?

Brother Xavier’s long road to the hermit’s life began at St. Meinrad Archabbey in south central Indiana. He was a monk there for twenty-five years. He traveled frequently to the monastery’s foundations in California and Peru, arriving at Christ in the Desert in 1978. At the abbot’s suggestion, he first tried the hermetic life for two weeks. Next he spent the forty days of Lent in solitude, then a year. “I was a little scared,” he says. He returned to the community to become the novice master and was then sent to the monastery’s foundation in Mexico until 1994, at which point he returned to New Mexico and became a full-time hermit. “I’m satisfied in that I think I’m doing what I should. It just fell in my lap!” Perhaps only an anchorite would look at a thirty-nine year process of fits and starts as falling into his lap.

At the risk of exhausting the baseball metaphor, Xavier does not think he is some sort of spiritual All-Star. Nor is the hermetic life all unified bliss with the Godhead, “I don’t feel I’m doing the life justice, but I’m doing the best I can. Ups and downs, they’re all part of the deal,” he says. Granted, monks who withdraw eliminate many of the work-a-day concerns that keep the laity up at night. Still, it cannot be easy to hold yourself to the highest human ethical standards and strive to meet God in prayer on a regular basis.
As Brother Xavier indicates, motivation and perspective are key in this process. Seeking an experience of the divine cannot be a purely academic exercise. Nor can it be rooted in an acquisitive drive to gather as many unique experiential memories as possible, the equivalent of parasailing when on vacation, or hiking to Machu Picchu because there’s a good chance you’ll never be in Peru again. Lane writes:

In popular spirituality today, there is an increased fascination with imageless meditation, both Eastern and Western. The temptation is for people to seek an instant encounter with unmediated power and wonder, grasping a “naked God” apart from the spiritual disciplines necessary for such an encounter. In response to this quest, the apophatic tradition cautions that a commitment to prayer has to be rooted, not in intellectual curiosity, but in a deep longing for God alone, as found in the cross. There is no cheap and easy way to divine majesty. (Lane 2007, 71)

Grace cannot be forced. The most the faithful can do is quiet themselves by force of habit and hope fervently that God responds to their deep desire to apprehend the hushed whisper of His still small voice.

Lane sets up a dichotomy between Pseudo-Dionysus, Meister Eckhart, and to a lesser extent the author of The Cloud of Unknowing on the one hand, and Maximus the Confessor, John of the Cross, and Thomas Merton on the other. The former group advocates a “radical abandonment of. . .images” (Lane 2007, 69) in their contemplative prayer while the latter calls for a more “Christological apophaticism” (Lane 2007, 71). In other words, the choice for Christians is to be subsumed in a pure experience of God, unfettered by human thoughts and concepts of any sort, or to hew more closely to the
philosophy of the evangelist John, making their way to union with God through the mediation of God’s son: “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

For the second group of Christian contemplative masters there is only this path. There is no need to blaze a new one, in fact to do so would lead the faithful astray.

Christians have their exemplar and, as always, he is the only one they have ever needed:

[They emphasize] the self-corrective role necessarily played by the image of Jesus in any negative theology. The quest for a more immediate access to God than that offered by Christ and the cross must be judged hazardous and presumptive. The God who is met in the darkness of unknowing is none other than the One already revealed in Jesus at Gethsemane. . . . The emptying to which Christians are called is always one patterned after the quintessential emptying, the kenosis, of Jesus Christ as Lord (Phil. 2:5-11). (Lane 2007, 71.)

Without Jesus as guide and model, Christians run the risk of error. Perhaps the greatest of which is the prideful contention that they could ever successfully “go it alone” in their desire for divine union.

On the other hand, it is irresponsible and inaccurate to conclude that the former group’s contributions were minor. In fact they illuminate this opaque practice of contemplative prayer in very helpful ways. The author of The Cloud of Unknowing was most likely a Carthusian monk—the same order profiled seven centuries later in Philip Gröning’s Into Great Silence—writing in England in the 1300s. As mentioned previously, the work was a guide to contemplative prayer for novice monks, and in it the author describes both the barriers and aids to God in meteorological terms. Lane summarizes, “A dark cloud always
separates the believer from her deepest desire, a God beyond the reach of human reason. It is a frustrating darkness through which the mind cannot see, yet it serves to intensify longing for that which is loved.” (Lane 2007, 72)

Given the seeker’s relative powerlessness to break through such an obstacle, his only option is to wait for God faithfully and lovingly, sheltered from the “world of distractions” behind a second cloud of his own making. Human love is not enough to transcend the cloud, yet God’s love is. The faithful, like Brother Xavier, can only wait. It is solely in this posture of submission, silence, and self-negation that human beings are receptive to divine union. “Everything must be forgotten in the process of yearning for God. . .the more self-outpouring we are, abandoning the ego and all it’s frenzied needs, the more truly we become ourselves, taken to the heart of our deepest being in God” (Lane 2007, 72).

As to the experience of contemplation or meditative prayer itself, it is a difficult thing to express. Usually any attempt to describe it must fall back on apophatic practice, but there is agreement within the tradition on more than a few terms. First of all, meditative prayer can be described as fruitful or arid. Not surprisingly, both are beneficial. In the former case, the seeker has some sense that he has quieted herself sufficiently to perceive the still small voice. He feels subsumed by an overwhelming peace and calm. To call it trance-like does it a
disservice by failing to describe it in its totality, yet conscious thought may have essentially ceased and time may have seemed to pass very quickly or come to a complete standstill. As the practitioner finishes praying, that sense of peace and calm may remain with him for a period of his day or longer. Lane writes: “There is no memory of an ‘experience’ as such, no encounter to describe; only a simple restfulness richer than sleep, a sense of having been held in the arms of something wonderfully unknown” (Lane 2007, 72). There are also many times when the practice seemingly fails to work. It should come as little surprise, however, that these arid occasions are helpful to the seeker as well.

Sometimes the experience of contemplative prayer is fairly dreadful. The meditator is uncomfortable, the room’s temperature is wrong, his position is awkward, his nose itches. His mind wanders to the long list of things he must accomplish today. There is distracting noise outside, or the clock on the wall ticks too intrusively. Time seems to drag into eternity, and the fifteen minutes he planned to “sit” seems like hours. Any perception of the divine or tranquility or calm is fleeting to non-existent. The meditator is experiencing what the tradition calls “aridity” in prayer. His prayer is desiccated, dried out. It is not fruitful, at least not in ways that seem readily apparent. By now though, it should be clear that anything analogous to the desert, the desolate, and the empty has profound benefit.
The Spanish Carmelite tradition, deeply influenced by Teresa of Avila, is renowned for stories of prayer so powerful that its practitioners are transported into states of profound ecstasy. This is not an experience easily achieved. (To be clear, when it occurs it is not a feat performed by the meditator but by God.) Like the Carthusian *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the Carmelites have a manual of sorts. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish monk, St. John of the Cross, wrote a long and beautiful meditative poem called the “Dark Night of the Soul.” This text is a reflection on the empty longing the faithful must experience as they seek God in prayer. It is an acknowledgement that the path of Christian contemplation can be long, circuitous and difficult; filled with the sort of false starts and seeming futility described previously. Saint John’s insight is that such hurdles are critical to the adherent’s progress.

Many religious and spiritual traditions recognize that their adherents will inevitably have periods of difficulty: trouble praying, crises of faith, doubt, fear. In many cases, the solution offered by experienced practitioners is a profound belief in the force of habit. Essentially, this is a reverse logic that argues behaviors should be repeated for their ability to generate the states of mind which usually create them. In other words, the “symptoms” can cause the “disease.”
If one experiences dryness in prayer and a sense that God is distant and unattainable, the last thing one should do is limit or discontinue the time spent praying. What is called for instead is a humble and faithful constancy, a willingness to return again and again to what seems unproductive, an acknowledgment that devotion to prayer bears fruit in and of itself. Perhaps it will result in moments of union with the divine. If it does, the benefits will be obvious; if it does not, the practitioner will still have maintained the habit of seeking God.

In fact, John of the Cross believed that there must be a “bottoming out” of sorts in our spiritual life. In order to experience divine love in the deepest way, the faithful must necessarily suffer the anguish of losing those things they perceive to be most valuable.

Only in devastating loss—beyond all security of language and identity, in despairing ever of obtaining the glory first sought—only then does a truth too wondrous to be grasped come rushing back out of the void. . . . We find ourselves truly free and capable of loving God, [John of the Cross] argued, only as we experience the deprivation of all other things we may have depended upon for comfort, security, and self-esteem. . . . What is left to one’s life, he asks, when everything external is taken away? (Lane 2007, 73)

The faithful must come to a point where everything is gone but God. They must, in fact, “lose their lives to find them.” This sort of reductionism—the realization that God’s love alone transcends all experience, good or bad—is vital to seeing things from an authentic Christian perspective. This understanding puts
everything in perspective. It anchors the believer to an unshakeable foundation. It becomes, for the faithful, unmoving ground. However, getting to this bedrock can be a very difficult process indeed.

One of the forms this reductive process takes is dryness, aridity, the seeming absence of God in prayer, but there are many other forms. John of the Cross holds that the myriad experiences of difficulty, struggle, even tragedy in human lives are *more* helpful, more meaningful, than the ecstasy of divine union. Lane writes:

> For John of the Cross, growth in the life of apophatic prayer is aided by experience of loss. Indeed, tragedy in one’s personal life can be trusted as a gift of God’s unfailing presence far more than trances, raptures, or visions received in so-called mystical experiences. He points to the desert imagery of scripture in his insistence that a loving knowledge of God is not found in “spiritual delights and gratifications,” but in “the sensory aridities and detachments referred to by the dry and desert land.” God leads us into a “land without a way.” This only is a path to love, being “led into a remarkably deep and vast wilderness. . . an immense and unbounded desert, the more delightful, savorous, and loving, the deeper, vaster, and more solitary it is.” (Lane 2007, 74)

This is clearly about relinquishing the human desire to control and letting it be replaced by faith. According to John, the size and scope of the “desert,” i.e. the loss or tragedy, is directly proportional to the experience of divine love which it may provide. The more terrible the event, the more the faithful must realize that God remains when everything of apparent value has been shattered and lost.
Love comes from loss. Again, paradox reigns and believers depend on grace. The only meaningful response in the face of such damage and bereavement is for the faithful to still themselves and open their hearts to the One who they believe loves all of humanity with a love beyond understanding. This too will undoubtedly cause some discomfort in the form of aridity and keen anticipation. That is all part of the process of letting go. Lane writes:

It is a deep mystery that love is born in the mind’s (and body’s) experience of emptiness and loss. The longing of the soul, made sharper by the painful absence of that which it loves—by its inability to close on what it desires—reaches in darkness for a beloved who comes unannounced and without guarantee. God reaches through the dark night of the senses, as John of the Cross would express it, to offer freely in love what no human effort could buy. (Lane 2007, 73)

Christians believe that we all, in the end, are completely dependent. Human need is profound. This is indeed a bitter pill for many to swallow in a culture that champions the virtues of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and individualism. Ironically, these traits—if taken to their logical extreme, which is a solitary life—ultimately reveal the falsity of their collective promise. If practiced prayerfully and with an open mind, they bring the devotee full circle. It is yet another paradox that solitude and isolation show human beings just how needy they really are.

So Christians are ultimately called to empty themselves as Jesus did. They must be still in their isolation, humility, and need. Lane writes of “the anguished sense of absence necessary for the deepest experience of love” (Lane 2007, 75). As Jesus cried
out for the God who seemed so suddenly distant from him on the cross, so too must the faithful call to their “Abba.” Lane observes, “The God of the Bible is an ever elusive one. The only guarantee of divine availability is God’s own promise to be present to those who empty themselves in perfect trust” (Lane 2007, 63).

The key then to the teaching of John of the Cross is that the faithful must abandon their clinging and grasping tendencies. They must, with divine aid, relinquish their desire to control, possess, and manipulate. They must realize that such efforts are ultimately futile. There is a popular slogan in some religious circles, “Let go and let God.” At the risk of promoting t-shirt theology, this is not a bad summation of John’s position. Lane writes:

> It is only in the wasteland of the dark night, in the letting go of everything, that love—like a night blooming cereus in a tropical garden—is able to blossom. . . . God hides from us in an act of loving play, wooing us to the very abandonment that makes love possible. Love cannot exist so long as it remains an object to be possessed. It is born only in the letting go of all grasping and being grasped. The way up the mountain of God’s love, as John describes in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is the way of “nada, nada, nada.” (Lane 2007, 74)

And so the faithful let go. Whether in physical or mental space, they withdraw and separate themselves from the shallow distractions of the world and the false self it perpetuates. They acknowledge their lack of control and submit to the divine will. With “nothing” or “no thing” distracting them, they abandon themselves into the heart of God and trust in His wisdom and love for them. They realize that His love alone is comfort in trying circumstances, from the
merely irritating to the most dreadful they can imagine. Now, to complete the task of trying to live lives of holiness, they must descend from their respective Carmels and apply what they have learned on high to life in community. For advice on how to do that, they would be wise to turn to Thomas Merton, Monk of Gethsemani.
CHAPTER 5

ALONE TOGETHER:
THOMAS MERTON AND THE COMMUNITY OF SOLITARIES

Solitude is not separation. . . the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men.

—Thomas Merton, OCSO
New Seeds of Contemplation

Born in 1915, Thomas Merton was the son of a New Zealander father and an American mother. He grew up initially in France and England and later in New York. A very bright young man, he was excelling in his doctoral studies at Columbia when, through the influence of fellow students and wide-ranging reading, he became attracted to the Catholic faith. After a multi-year period of discernment, he decided to leave a promising life in academe and become a monk. Initially interested in the Franciscan order, he ultimately sought what he believed to be a stricter brand of monasticism and desired to join the Carthusians above all others. During the war period, however, there was no American Charterhouse and so Merton settled on the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, who are more commonly known as “Trappists” after their mother house in La Trappe, France. He became a novice at the Abbey of Gethsemani south of Bardstown, Kentucky in 1941.

1 The Charterhouse of the Transfiguration in Vermont was not founded until 1951, and a permanent monastery was not built until 1970.
Merton could not escape his own talent as a writer. His autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*—which chronicled his childhood and young adulthood and contained poetic meditations on his conversion, growing faith, and monastic vocation—became a sensation and bestseller upon its publication in 1948. It captured a strong post-war mood of spiritual questing that caused monasteries to overflow with returning servicemen who, having lived through hell, now sought a piece of heaven in following the Benedictine Rule. Not insignificantly Merton’s book generated significant income for the monastery.

With the support of his superiors, Merton continued to write and find a receptive audience. He became, as odd and paradoxical as it may sound, a celebrity monk. Writing dozens of books, hundreds of articles, and thousands of letters, Merton became the most prolific and widely known American apologist for modern monasticism and solitude in the twentieth century. He was, and remains, the authority on the subject. Though not everyone is a fan.

Robert Kull who chronicled his year in the Patagonian wilderness in a book called *Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in Extremes* wrote the following of Thomas Merton:

> He doesn’t convince me. Too sure of himself. Too dogmatic in telling me about solitude—what is and is not healthy to do when living alone. The universal “You” slips too easily from his pen. And he never actually spent much time in solitude. For years he petitioned the Catholic hierarchy to allow him to live as a hermit within the Trappist order, yet when he was finally granted the privilege, he received visitors all the
time. His brother monks, trying to protect his privacy, turned people away, but Merton told them about a back way into his cottage. Even sending an email and waiting for a reply alters the quality of my solitude, so it’s hard to imagine that Merton, himself, traveled far into his own aloneness when he was so frequently with visitors and wrote and received so many letters.

What Merton writes makes sense to me, but I wonder how much is his own direct experience and how much is internalized from reading? He argues the need for silence to escape the incessant flow of language, but the man wrote over three hundred papers and thirty-seven books! (Kull 2008, 92)

There are two problems here, one small the other large. The first is that Kull commits the sin he is so hard on Merton for, namely applying one’s own experience of solitude to someone else’s. Writing, Kull mentions email specifically, may compromise his sense of solitude, but writing may not have done the same for Merton. Secondly, and far greater, Kull misses the point of what Merton is practicing. Merton’s life and writings hold up a consistent exemplar: namely, that the solitary cannot legitimately isolate himself on a consistent basis from his fellow man. Indeed, any benefits which the hermit accrues in solitude are not fully utilized until they are shared with others.

As Abbot Carlyle acknowledged previously, it is a common and cutting critique of monasticism in general and anchoritism specifically that both are self-indulgent, self-centered pursuits. This is the serious charge which underlies the topic of this paper. Essentially, how can the adherents of a religion which teaches selfless love spend so much time with themselves? Precisely because the time they spend in faithful solitude
serves to strip their selfish interests away and strengthens them to live lives of service and love. How do they know it will work? They must have faith that their vocation is authentic. Merton writes:

The solitary is necessarily a man who does what he wants to. In fact, he has nothing else to do. That is why his vocation is both dangerous and despised. Dangerous because, in fact, he must become a saint by doing what he wants to, instead of doing what he does not want to do. It is very hard to be saint by doing what you like.

. . . This vocation is wisely despised by those who fear to do what they want to do, knowing well that what they want to do is not the will of God. But the Solitary must be a man who has the courage to do the thing he most wants in the world to do—to live in solitude. It requires heroic humility and heroic hope—the mad hope that God will protect him against himself, that God loves him so much that He will accept such a choice as if it were His own. (Merton 1999, 110-111) (my emphasis)

As in all things, the hermit relies on God for the validation of his vocation and subsequent life.

Merton’s most fully formed meditation on the subject of withdrawal is the short but richly layered Thoughts in Solitude. Written in 1953 and 1954 “when the author, by the grace of God and the favor of his Superiors, was able to enjoy special opportunities for solitude and meditation” (Merton 1999, ix), the one hundred and thirty pages contain a great wealth of insight. Almost immediately, Merton anticipates critiques like Kull’s and acknowledges that his observations may not be valuable for all readers: “It is
quite likely that the intuitions\(^2\) which seem to be most vital to the writer will not have much importance for others, who do not have the same kind of vocation. So in that sense the book is, after all, quite personal” (Merton 1999, x). Merton is clear that to a great extent Christian vocation, literally a personalized “calling,” which tradition holds is divine in origin, determines how believers perceive the nature and role of solitude.\(^3\)

He is also clear that his observations are critical to leading the life to which he has been called by God: “But in the main these reflections on man’s solitude before God, man’s dialogue with God in silence, and the interrelation of our personal solitudes with one another, (my emphasis) are for the writer essential to his own peculiar way of life” (Merton 1999, x). Those who feel a similar calling—if not to monasticism, at least to a deeper understanding of Christian solitude—would be hard pressed to find a better teacher.

This concept—that all human beings are solitaries and that their “personal solitudes” are profoundly interrelated—is central to Merton’s philosophy of withdrawal. “A man becomes a solitary at the moment when, no matter what may be his external surroundings, he is suddenly aware of his own inalienable solitude and sees that he will never be anything but solitary. From that moment, solitude is not potential—it is actual”

\(^2\) From the Late Latin intuitio: “the act of contemplating”, to perceive, to apprehend, to divine.
\(^3\) This issue of differing vocations is addressed further in the following chapter on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s critique of monasticism.
(Merton 1999, 77). This is not, as some might imagine, an occasion to panic. From Merton’s perspective, it represents a mighty opportunity; for once the seeker comes to terms with his condition, he is ripe to experience the divine, regardless of his environment, “As soon as a man is fully disposed to be alone with God, he is alone with God no matter where he may be—in the country, the monastery, the woods or the city” (Merton 1999, 96). By the grace of God, the adherent can now recognize that his solitude is shared. Peter France quotes Merton: “His [the hermit’s] solitude is the foundation of a deep, pure gentle sympathy with all other men. . . More—it is the doorway by which he enters into the mystery of God and brings others into that mystery by the power of his love and his humility” (France 1996, 176). In his aloneness, the hermit is like all men and women, and—in a paradoxical and poignant turn—his solitude bears him across the void to union with all of humanity and creation.

Solitude, silence, poverty, and gratitude make the hermit’s life one of prayer, which coalesces into an overwhelming love on a cosmic scale. In a prayer ringing with Franciscan love of the natural world, Merton does not include the stars and planets, but he may as well have: “Let me seek then the gift of silence, and poverty, and solitude where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all” (Merton 1999, 92). For Merton the eremitic life reveals clearly that the world and everything in it is shot
through with God’s presence. Therefore it is all worthy and deserving of the believer’s love and adoration.

Merton argues that practitioners should still themselves in order to apprehend clearly what they are charged with by Christ. “The ears with which one hears the message of the Gospel are hidden in man’s heart, and these ears do not hear anything unless they are favored with a certain interior solitude and silence” (Merton 1999, xii-xiii) (my emphasis). It is this “message of the Gospel” from which Christians derive their ethics. So far from contradicting Gospel ethics then, Merton argues that solitude and silence are vital for Christians to gain a true and deep grasp of the way in which they ought to live. For Merton, Gospel ethics—and necessarily, their proper application—cannot be understood completely by reason and the mind. Both must be intuited by the heart in quiet solitary prayer.

This is an apophatic event, and Merton knows how powerful and liberating this meta-language experience can be. “When we have really met and known the world in silence, words do not separate us from the world nor from other men, nor from God, nor from ourselves because we no longer trust entirely in language to contain reality” (Merton 1999, 83). He also knows that this experience can only be apprehended in silence and solitude. “The greatest of God’s secrets is God Himself. He waits to communicate Himself to me in a way that I can never express to others or even think
about coherently myself. I must desire it in silence. It is for this that I must leave all things” (Merton 1999, 123). To be sure, the goal is not daily dawns filled with Carmelite ecstasies, but rather, and as frequently as possible, the reinforcement of our role as co-creators of the Kingdom of God. What should be made clear to the prayerful Christian is his obligation and ability to mediate the love and mercy of God to his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Merton explains that in order for believers to understand this most important of roles, they must first get their spiritual priorities in order and understand the human condition from a realistic perspective. “There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality. . . .[life] begins by renouncing the illusory reality which created things acquire when they are seen only in their relation to our own selfish interests” (Merton 1999, 3). This is not some fire-and-brimstone proclamation of Manichean dualism. The world is not a hell of satanic temptation from which believers should flee in panic for their eternal souls. The Christian solitary is not running from anything, he is running to something. Merton continues, “the ‘unreality’ of material things is only relative to the greater reality of spiritual things” (Merton 1999, 4) (his emphasis). Believers have a choice to make vis a vis the sun around which their lives will orbit. Is true life, the life God wants His children to live, centered on careers, salaries, travel, or consumer toys? Perhaps action, ego, opinion, or will? Not likely.
Instead Merton makes a case for things like love, kindness, humility, compassion, empathy, intuition, observation, and availability. This is not a completely dichotomous choice; the faithful have jobs, earn money, need to assert themselves on occasion, but Merton and the greater tradition teach that these things should not be at the center of a Christian life well-lived.

Establishing the proper center takes time. According to Merton, it also takes solitude and silence. He acknowledges that in the Christian tradition there has always been one great laboratory where the faithful have distilled life to its essence and oriented their lives around the proper center: “The Desert Fathers believed that the wilderness had been created as supremely valuable in the eyes of God precisely because it had no value to men” (Merton 1999, 4-5). Merton recognizes that solitude in wild places forces the faithful to be rather than to do. Encouraged by culture, society, and a malleable environment, Christians can easily distract themselves with the bustle of constant “doing.” On the other hand, the wilderness forces the believer to take care of basic needs (shelter, water, food) and little else. There it is difficult—if not impossible—to irrigate a field, build a city, establish a sphere of influence. Instead, human industriousness must turn inward:

The desert was created simply to be itself, not to be transformed by men into something else. So too the mountains and the sea. The desert is therefore the logical dwelling place for the man who seeks to be nothing but himself—that is to say, a creature solitary and poor and dependent
upon no one but God, with no great project standing between himself and God. (Merton 1999, 5)

And so the faithful go into the desert to reorient their lives, to transcend the inherent human need to putter about “bettering” the world around them. Instead they will first attempt to better the world within them.

Merton is also clear that as wonderful as withdrawal may sound upon superficial consideration, it is no walk in the park. As mentioned previously, the process of reorienting a life, stripping away all that is ultimately hollow and unsatisfying, refining a life in the crucible of solitude and silence, is frightening and fraught with peril. Time and again the first-hand accounts of this process contain episodes of profound existential dread. It may sound feasible for an hour in church on Sunday or in a master’s thesis, but very few are comfortable with the idea of truly losing their lives that they might find them. As Merton enumerates, the greatest risks are twofold: insanity and possession.

First, the desert is the country of madness. Second, it is the refuge of the devil, thrown out into the “wilderness of upper Egypt” to “wander in dry places.” . . .So the man who wanders into the desert to be himself must take care that he does not go mad and become the servant of the one who dwells there in a sterile paradise of emptiness and rage. (Merton 1999, 6)

“Um, gee,” many may think, “If these are possible outcomes, I believe I’ll watch some TV and leave this true Christian living thing for another time.” For many, perhaps most, it is a natural reaction to avoid risk and pain. There is a reason that the spiritual athletes
who have persevered in this practice to a successful end have been relatively rare. For the rest of the Christian faithful, not following their example—like most cases of trading future benefit for current comfort—is a short-term gain and a long-term loss.

Again, a deeper examination occurs in the section on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but vital to the Christian message is the teaching that any believer can become a saint. Holiness is not the refuge of the few by design, rather it is human reluctance to make the effort that keeps the ranks of the truly virtuous so sparsely populated. What must be clear though is that the difficulty of living a life of holiness is unavoidable and has little to do with location OR vocation. Living a life according to Gospel ethics is hard whether a Christian is cloistered in a monastery or not. The deserts a Christian experiences can be literal or figurative, but the tradition is certain that the faithful will have to cross them.

To highlight the inherent difficulty of undertaking this sort of life, Merton concludes his opening chapter by calling the desert “the home of despair” (Merton 1999, 8). My thesaurus finds for despair: “misery,” “desolation,” “anguish,” “gloom,” “depression,” “despondency,” “dejection,” and for an antonym, “joy.” Contained in this ugly litany is indeed a descent to the fuzzy border of madness. In short, it encapsulates the sort of mental pain and sense of abandonment nearly every human being would seek to avoid. Merton would no doubt agree that life in the desert potentially involves all of
these synonyms for despair, save the one in my thesaurus I have omitted, “hopelessness.” This distinction is vital to the Christian reordering of a life: hope is never lost. Merton writes that the challenge of the adherent then is to “live facing despair, but not to consent. To trample it down under hope in the Cross” (Merton 1999, 8). The example of Jesus who, despite his own moments of dread in Gethsemane and on Calvary was never forsaken by the Father, again shows Christians the way. Christians are indeed to remain faithful in hope. They realize that God will grant them hope in the face of despair. They see that God will abide with them as they undergo the pain of dying unto self. They know that Christ has established hope for all.

And so it is hope that makes the desert survivable, promise that makes it bloom. It is belief in what things may and will become that reminds the adherent of the redemptive power of God. After all, death has become life through Christ, heaven has been opened. Merton writes:

A Christian is a man who lives . . . above all, in the hope of a world to come. Hope is the secret of true asceticism. It denies our own judgments and desires and rejects the world in its present state, not because either we or the world are evil, but because we are not in a condition to make the best use of our own or the world’s goodness. But we rejoice in hope. We enjoy created things in hope. We enjoy them not as they are in themselves, but as they are in Christ—full of promise. (Merton 1999, 28)

So when a practitioner returns to God in contemplative prayer, in silence and solitude, he is reminded of the promises God has made and kept. He is reminded of historical
hopes fulfilled. He trusts that his own hope is rightly placed in God. He knows that even as it is his duty to practice the Pauline trinity of faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13, 1 Thessalonians 1:3), that same trinity flowing from God to him in silence and solitude will sustain him in his active life in the world.

In the end, it is hope and trust in this divine circularity: the flow of grace and mercy and love from God to the faithful to fellow man back to God that underpins the entire Christian enterprise here on earth. In turn, it is hopeful and trusting contemplative practice that best lets the “weak link” in the process, namely human beings, apprehend those blessings as they flow from the divine. Merton prays:

Why should I cherish in my heart a hope that devours me—the hope for perfect happiness in this life—when such hope doomed to frustration, is nothing but despair? My hope is in what the eye has never seen. Therefore let me not trust in visible rewards. My hope is in what the heart of man cannot feel. Therefore let me not trust in the feelings of my heart. My hope is in what the hand of man has never touched. Do not let me trust what I can grasp between my fingers. Death will loosen my grasp and my vain hope will be gone.

Let my trust be in Your mercy, not in myself. Let my hope be in Your love, not in health, or strength, or ability or human resources. If I trust You, everything else will become, for me, strength, health, and support. Everything will bring me to heaven. If I do not trust You, everything will be my destruction. (Merton 1999, 29-30)

It is perhaps controversial to speak of a “childlike faith” in circles of educated people with great confidence in the power of reason and logic. By definition anything childlike should be outgrown, ultimately “seen through,” cast off, abandoned for a “deeper” or
“truer” understanding. It comes as no surprise that Merton is calling for exactly the opposite.

Merton advocates that we remain children, that we allow the Father to be the Father. The Evangelist Matthew writes:

The disciples approached Jesus and said, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?” He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:1-4)

The footnote for this passage reads that the child is the exemplar, “not because of any supposed innocence of children but because of their complete dependence on, and trust in, their parents. So must the disciples be, in respect to God” (USCCB - NAB - Matthew 18 2002). The faithful must trust and hope in Him as a child trusts and hopes in his protector and guardian.

As the father of four boys under eight years old, I know the trust and hope they have in me. It is a vast responsibility, and I live in dread of the times I have let them down or will fail to live up to their expectations in the future. The difference is that for the Christian, God never disappoints. Even in the face of tragedy and loss, indeed especially then, the Christian believes that God abides. There is always trust that life
and death will unfold as they should. There is always hope in redemption and the continual flow of mercy and grace.

Given then that this profound sense of hope and trust can mitigate much of the mental anguish of despair, there is still some physical pain that often accompanies solitude and silence. Historically, withdrawal was also bound to other ascetic practices such as a limited intake of food and water, extensive time spent in prayer, minimal sleep. Monks, hermits, and other adherents still practice these disciplines to lesser or greater extents today.

Merton explains that the goal of such asceticism must ultimately be the augmentation of the best human traits. The true goal is sainthood. Not self-denial for its own sake or in service to some lofty intellectual piety, but rather to foster a genuine and vigorous love for fellow man. “Too many ascetics fail to become great saints precisely because their rules and ascetic practices have merely deadened their humanity instead of setting it free to develop richly in all its capacities, under the influence of grace” (Merton 1999, 12). Self-denial is meant first to enrich the humanity of those who practice it, not to lessen that humanity. Second, self-denial enriches the lives of those with whom its practitioners interact. Self-denial should allow the ascetic to engage others more deeply and more lovingly, rather than serve to isolate him further.
Initially, self-denial is a sort of spiritual boot camp. Merton calls it “penance” and is clear that there can be no escaping the cost, nor should the practitioner lose sight of the true benefits:

We must suffer. But the attack of mortification upon sense, sensibility, imagination, judgment and will is intended to enrich and purify them all. Our five senses are dulled by inordinate pleasure. Penance makes them keen, gives them back their natural vitality, and more. Penance clears the eye of conscience and of reason. It helps us think clearly, judge sanely. It strengthens the action of our will. And Penance also tones up the quality of emotion. . . (Merton 1999, 13-14)

In the end, self-denial serves the greater goal of the death of the false self. It reorients the practitioner to the proper compass headings. It functions as a sort of reset button, returning the believer to the “factory default settings,” as it were. It also readies the Christian ascetic to reengage with his brothers and sisters in Christ, renewed, refocused, recalibrated to live with them selflessly and lovingly.

For Merton, the goal of withdrawal is to return, to return as a more powerful and efficient vehicle for God’s love and grace. Indeed, the false self should die, but the true self must not: “For if our emotions really die in the desert, our humanity dies with them. We must return from the desert like Jesus or St. John, with our capacity for feeling expanded and deepened, strengthened against the appeals of falsity, warned against temptation, great, noble and pure” (Merton 1999, 14) (my emphasis). The practitioner does not go into the desert for himself ultimately. He goes in order that his life might be
transformed, but that is not an end in itself. The purpose of his transformation should be that those around him experience the love of God through him; that he becomes a conduit of divine grace in the world; that when people encounter him, they have some small experience of God. This of course is the definition of sainthood.

Merton writes, “. . . a saint is one whom God’s love has fully developed into a person in the likeness of his Creator” (Merton 1999, 13). What would such a person be like? The tradition is rich with examples. A partial list of adjectives might include: humble, loving, kind, compassionate, forgiving, patient, hopeful, grateful, faithful, charitable, dependent. These traits are the goals of solitude, silence, and other ascetic practices. John of the Cross warned practitioners of the dangers of visions and ecstasies; they should not be the outcomes fervently sought. On the contrary, the work of the true saint is ultimately in the trenches of everyday interactions with other human beings. How does the believer treat others? Is he present to them? Does he listen? Does he attend to what they are saying and what they need? Is he in service to them? Does he put their lives before his own? There can be no true sainthood alone in a cave. The test of holiness comes when someone knocks on the hermitage door. How does he act when his solitude is broken? How does he act when someone trespasses against him?

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4 Sainthood that the Church has bestowed on its Doctors and others for their intellectual/theological contributions must either be viewed as a lesser type of sainthood, or be seen as an acknowledgement of more than their contributions in letters. I would argue strongly for the latter.
Peter France quotes the French hermit Charles de Foucauld on the example that he—and indeed every Christian—must live:

My apostolate must be of kindness. In seeing me people must say to themselves: “Since this is a good man, his religion must be good”. And if I am asked why I am gentle and good, I must say: “Because I am the servant of someone far more good than I. If only you knew how good is my master, Jesus.” (France 1996, 156)

James Cowan writing about St. Anthony says, “It was his humility, his gentleness, and his heartbreaking courtesy that were the seal of his sanctity to his contemporaries, far beyond abstinence, miracle or sign” (Cowan 2006, 46). Counter-intuitively, the hermit withdraws so that by the grace of God he might manifest God’s love to the world as Jesus did. At the apogee of his vocation, the hermit enables the world to experience God.

To reinforce the idea that the adherent must engage, Merton establishes repeatedly that the reordering of life, the work toward sainthood must be both theoretical and practical: “A purely mental life may be destructive if it leads us to substitute thought for life and ideas for actions. . . . Our destiny is to live out what we think. . . It is only by making our knowledge part of ourselves, through action, that we enter into the reality that is signified by our concepts” (Merton 1999, 16). For Merton, there can be no hypothetical sainthood; it is impossible for one to practice a life of holiness and love in theory only.
As with most things in the Christian life, Jesus is central. Merton argues that by his very existence, Jesus proves that the faithful must live as human beings in the world.

The spiritual life is first of all a life. It is not merely something to be known and studied, it is to be lived. . . . The spiritual life is not . . . a life uprooted from man’s human condition and transplanted into the realm of angels. We live as spiritual men when we live as men seeking God. If we are to become spiritual, we must remain men. And if there were not evidence of this everywhere in theology, the Mystery of the Incarnation itself would be ample proof of it. Why did Christ become Man if not to save men by uniting them mystically with God through His own Sacred Humanity? Jesus lived the ordinary life of the men of His time, in order to sanctify the ordinary lives of men of all time. If we want to be spiritual, then, let us first of all live our lives. (Merton 1999, 37-38)

So the charge is clear. Once again the Christian is to do as Jesus does, namely to engage the world in all its messiness and confusion, anguish and joy. Seekers of God are meant to muddle along in the “ordinariness,” trying and failing and trying again in concert with their fellow men. The key is that they must muddle along with hearts of love.

In a beautiful self-sustaining system then, this love, the love of God and of fellow man, will arise in the faithful more and more as they live right-ordered lives, i.e., lives with God at their center, “It is by living his life that the monk finds God, and not by adding something to his life which God has not put there. For wisdom is God Himself, living in us, revealing Himself to us. Life reveals itself to us only in so far as we live it” (Merton 1999, 50-51). As we have mentioned before, there is something to be said for the power of good habits in this. Namely, the more believers seek and
attempt to have love of God and neighbor govern their actions, the easier it will become. Yet this makes it sound no different than establishing a habit of exercising at the gym every morning, and it is a considerably more difficult task than that.

Ultimately, human beings are not terribly effective or efficient agents in their desire to do what is right. In the end, from a Christian perspective, they are dependent on God’s grace and mercy.

Merton champions this dependence. As we have noted, he also argues that the nature of God’s gifts to His creation is circular. In the Christian narrative, God’s gifts of grace, mercy, and love are poured out upon human beings in order that they may return them to God by being living examples of them for their brothers and sisters in Christ. In addition, the very ability of the faithful to live lives governed by these gifts is dependent on the gifts being given in the first place:

In doing God’s will we receive the mercy of God, because it is only by a gift of His mercy that we can do His will with a pure and supernatural intention. And He gives us this intention as a grace which serves only as a means for us to obtain more grace, and more mercy, by enlarging our capacity to love Him. The greater our capacity to receive His mercy, the greater is our power to give Him glory, for He is glorified only by His own gifts, and He is most glorified by those in whom His mercy had produced the greatest love. (Merton 1999, 51)

How then are the faithful aware of these gifts in the first place, given that the cataract they form falls in silence? By being silent themselves. By withdrawing for periods of
solitude and stillness in order to recognize that the blessings of God’s grace, mercy, and love rain down now and forever.

It should be clear then that the greatest glorification of God is the manifestation of God’s love in the world. Not solely the manifestation of God’s love in a cave, in a cell, in a hermitage. Surely these are lesser glorifications, but the ultimate spiritual life, the ultimate life of holiness, is that life which reflects the grace, mercy, and love of God to other human beings. This is the life that a contemplative practice must inform and strengthen. This is the end to which the observation of silence and the routine of withdrawal must be oriented.

To be sure, it is not enough to argue that the contemplative life should inform the active life of love and service, but rather that it must. Merton writes, “. . .we have to have enough mastery of ourselves to renounce our own will into the hands of Christ—so that He may conquer what we cannot reach by our own efforts” (Merton 1999, 18). Human beings, individual Christians, cannot consistently will themselves to live lives of love. They ultimately depend on God’s grace and mercy, which are best apprehended in contemplative practice.

Again the example of the narrative Jesus is instructive. There are numerous passages in the Gospels where the Evangelists describe Christ withdrawing to a place away from others and subsuming himself in prayer. The forty days in the wilderness
and the agony in Gethsemane are the most well-known and most protracted examples of this, but there are other shorter occasions during his ministry where he goes off, apart from the apostles, and prays to the Father.\(^5\)

Merton is clear what is going on here; the benefits of this practice have not changed since the time of Christ. Aside from the greatest benefit of apprehending both the mercy and love of God and the best application of Gospel ethics, solitary and silent contemplative prayer has four other advantages (Merton 1999, 38-39). First, it keeps the practitioner spiritually alive and awake. Second, it renews the practitioner’s faith. Third, it sensitizes the practitioner to inspiration. Last, it requires of the practitioner “unending” courage, perseverance, and patience.

In the first case, prayer keeps God “on the radar screen,” as it were. In fact, Merton uses the metaphor of “pilots of fogbound steamers, peering into the gloom” as they try to reach the harbor safely (Merton 1999, 39). A practice of regular prayer never allows the Christian to forget around Whom his life should be oriented, it reminds the Christian to check his bearings against a true compass. Christians’ Abrahamic brothers and sisters of the Muslim faith have probably instituted the most helpful practice in this

regard, mandating that all of the faithful pray five times a day, not just the ordained or religious.

For Merton, the second matter of faith renewal is closely bound to the previous benefits. When a Christian becomes more aware of God’s grace and mercy through a practice of contemplative prayer, and when that practice emphasizes God’s centrality in the Christian’s life, it is part and parcel of a deepening faith in God. By returning to God in prayer, Christians acknowledge their love of Him and hope in Him. In the case of a crisis of faith, as we have mentioned previously, the practice of contemplative prayer can strengthen a wobbly faith and even foster faith where none existed. In a real sense God grades the prayerful Christian on his or her effort. Merton writes, “For inner silence depends on a continual seeking, a continued crying in the night, a repeated bending over the abyss” (Merton 1999, 86). No matter how seemingly ineffective, the habit of coming to God, the repeated attempt to seek Him in solitude and silence, will ultimately be rewarded. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7-8).

Agreeing with John of the Cross, Merton writes that the halting meager steps we sometimes take are a form of aridity and by definition, difficulty in prayer can often represent a way forward, “There is no such thing as a prayer in which ‘nothing is done’
or ‘nothing happens,’ although there may well be a prayer in which nothing is perceived or felt or thought.” (Merton 1999, 41) And again:

Sometimes, meditation is nothing but an unsuccessful struggle to turn ourselves to God, to seek His Face by faith. Any number of things beyond our control may make it morally impossible for one to meditate effectively. In that case, faith and good will are sufficient. If one has made a really sincere and honest effort to turn himself to God and cannot seem to get his wits together at all, then the attempt will have to count as a meditation. This means that God in His mercy, accepts our unsuccessful efforts in the place of a real meditation. Sometimes it happens that this interior helplessness is a sign of real progress in the interior life—for it makes us depend more completely and peacefully on the mercy of God. (Merton 1999, 43) (my emphasis)

Even when Christian meditation does not go well, it goes well. The roiling thoughts, the “monkey mind,” the lack of tranquility and peace in prayer, all serve to deepen faith in a God who loves and forgives.

Third, contemplative prayer is a vehicle for inspiration. The inspiration can be spiritual, ethical, or intellectual. Regardless, “things come to you” when you pray in solitude and silence. When faced with a difficult decision or a problem to overcome, people often advise one another to “sleep on it,” the idea being that the subconscious mind and perhaps the action of not thinking about the issue will ultimately lead to some clarity. In this way, contemplative prayer is essentially a “waking sleep.” From a Christian perspective, the quieting of the body and mind allows the practitioner to perceive a way forward by the grace of God.
Last, contemplative prayer makes its practitioners dogged. In the face of stark aridity or bountiful “moisture” they press on. They arise and sit in silence and solitude not knowing what the specific outcome will be, but knowing that by the grace of God it will be beneficial to them and their fellow men and women, one way or another. They are relentless in their trust.

In the end, Christian contemplation embodies another paradox. Merton writes, “The only thing to seek in contemplative prayer is God; and we seek Him successfully when we realize that we cannot find Him unless he shows Himself to us, and yet at the same time that He would not have inspired us to seek Him unless we had already found Him” (Merton 1999, 46). It seems a frequent insight in many wisdom traditions that the seeker already possesses what they are searching for, the goal or the treasure was “there all along” and rather than a quest or an adventure, what was needed to find it was a shift in perspective, a realization of things as they actually are, a movement from what is illusory to what is real and true. So too is it with the Christian contemplative’s search for God. God is with us; He has been all along. Our instructions for realizing this are clear: “Be still, and confess that I am God” (Psalm 46:11)!

Merton calls this stilling of oneself a gift. When the cenobite or anchorite withdraws in order to observe silence, he or she is making an offering:

The Christian solitary does not seek solitude merely as an atmosphere or as a setting for a special and exalted spirituality. Nor does he seek
solitude as a favorable means for obtaining something he wants—contemplation. He seeks solitude as an expression of his total gift of himself to God. His solitude is not a means of getting something, but a gift of himself. As such, it may imply renouncement and contempt of "the world" in its bad sense. It is never a renunciation of the Christian community. Indeed, it may express the solitary’s conviction that he is not good enough for most of the visible exercises of the community, that his own part is to carry out some hidden function, in the community’s spiritual cellar." (Merton 1999, 103) (my emphasis)

And so the monastic may toil unseen, spending a lifetime of effort "behind the scenes," as it were. This begs the question, "What then is that 'hidden function'?" If monks are some sort of spiritual stagehand, working quietly so that things run smoothly for the players, then what precisely are they doing?

Merton is clear that the monk’s function is ultimately to act towards others as he believes God acts towards him, that is, to mirror godly traits in the world, or more accurately to manifest those traits in their actuality, not merely some lesser facsimile of them.

No matter whether we be called to community or solitude, our vocation is to build upon the foundation of the Apostles and the prophets, and on the chief cornerstone which is Christ. This means we are called to fulfill and to realize the great mystery of His power in us, the power that raised Him from the dead and called us from the ends of the earth to live, to the Father, in Him. Whatever may be our vocation, we are called to be witnesses and ministers of the Divine Mercy.” (Merton 1999, 102-103) (my emphasis)

This is the Divine Mercy, not some stumbling, inconsistent, human version. This is the one that rains down on the just and unjust alike. This is not a call to be like God for
others, but to mediate a real and true experience of God *qua* God to others via God’s own mercy and love. This is the greatest task with which a believing ethical monotheist can be charged.

It must be obvious at this point that one cannot *both* “witness” and “minister” in complete isolation. As a hermit, one may be able to witness in solitude, in that the faithful know you are “out there” praying, living a life of example at the extreme end of the continuum of commitment, but it would be nearly impossible to minister in solitude; for that, a hermit must allow access. He must allow himself to interact with those who Christianity teaches are his own brothers and sisters, his own flesh and blood in the shared Body of Christ.

By so doing the hermit provides a living example: the example of losing life in order to find it, the example of continuous prayer, the example of constant gratitude, and most importantly, the example of unconditional love.

And this is the mystery of our vocation: not that we cease to be men in order to become angels or gods, but that the *love of my man’s heart can become God’s love for God and men*, and my human tears can fall from my eyes as the tears of God because they well up from the motion of His Spirit in the heart of His incarnate Son. Hence—the Gift of Piety grows in solitude, nourished by the Psalms.

When this is learned, then our love of other men becomes pure and strong. *We can go out to them* without vanity and without complacency, loving them with something of the purity and gentleness and hiddenness of God’s love for us.

This is the true fruit and the true purpose of Christian solitude. (Merton 1999, 129-130) (my emphasis)
Merton’s contemplative is “go[ing] out to them.” He is not, he cannot, isolate himself completely. To do so would mean a failure to bring God’s love and mercy into the world. This “going out” need not involve physical movement; Merton did it mainly through writing books, articles, and reams of personal correspondence. He moved in the world primarily via his pen and typewriter, “returning” from his hermitage time and again to demonstrate that withdrawal and the universality of human solitude are avenues to love and union in disguise.
In his signature work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls for an active and engaged Christianity. He lived his credo unto death. Killed by the Nazis for plotting against Hitler, Bonhoeffer was a modern martyr. Had he been a Catholic and not a Lutheran, there is a very strong chance that he would have been canonized by now.

As an advocate for engagement and a costly Christianity, Bonhoeffer was suspicious of monasticism. In analyzing his position, we must begin with the cheap grace/costly grace dialectic Bonhoeffer introduces almost immediately. First, according to Bonhoeffer, Christians should not “cherry pick” from the faith, but they do. There is a tendency for believers to think that they can accrue all the benefits of Christianity, without paying the cost. This, for Bonhoeffer, is cheap grace:

> Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. (Bonhoeffer 1966, 47)
Bonhoeffer is clear that there is no “free lunch.” In order to reap the benefits of the faith, Christians must settle their accounts.

Bonhoeffer argues that the practice of Christianity is *expensive*. Christianity must not be a once-a-week-on-Sunday experience; it is a daily commitment. Inherent in honoring the commitment is a significant degree of suffering and discomfort. Bonhoeffer argues that if the Christian truly follows the teachings of Christ—specifically the lessons of the “Sermon on the Mount,” as we will see below—there is a high price to be paid:

> Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all the he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

> Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man his only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is *costly* because it cost God the life of his Son: “ye were bought at a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is *grace* because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God. (Bonhoeffer 1966, 47-48)

This critique has much in common with Kierkegaard’s attack on what he saw as mindless membership in the Danish state church. Attempting to awaken these “lukewarm” believers, Kierkegaard called instead for a robust and frightening
Christianity. “To become a Christian then becomes the most terrible of all decisions in a person’s life, since it is a matter of winning faith through despair and offense (the Cerberus pair who guard the entry to becoming a Christian)” (Kierkegaard 1992, 372).

For both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer then, authentic Christianity is hard work.

To be clear, Bonhoeffer argues that early monasticism was both a repository and guardian of costly grace. As an institution, it initially allowed men and women the opportunity to remember the debt they owed and orient their lives around proper “repayment”:

> It is highly significant that the Church was astute enough to find room for the monastic movement, and to prevent it from lapsing into schism. Here on the outer fringe of the Church was a place where the older vision was kept alive. Here men remembered that grace costs, that grace means following Christ. Here they left all they had for Christ’s sake, and endeavored daily to practise [sic] his rigorous commands. Thus monasticism became a living protest against the secularization of Christianity and the cheapening of grace. (Bonhoeffer 1966, 49)

This was, at first, a positive development according to Bonhoeffer, but he argues that it led to two significant problems. First, monasticism codified a binary division of the faithful into those who were doing an outstanding job of practicing their Christianity and those who were not. Second, while monasticism may have initially been the product of a legitimate protest and a bastion of costly grace, it later became corrupted.

Bonhoeffer initially argues that monasticism establishes a group of über-Christians. He holds that this bifurcation of the standards to which the faithful are held is dangerous and antithetical to Christianity:
Monasticism was represented as an individual achievement which the mass of the laity could not be expected to emulate. By thus limiting the application of the commandments of Jesus to a restricted group of specialists, the Church evolved the fatal conception of the double standard—a maximum and a minimum standard of Christian obedience. Whenever the Church was accused of being too secularized, it could always point to monasticism as an opportunity of living a higher life within the fold, and thus justify the other possibility of a lower standard of life for others. And so we get the paradoxical result that monasticism, whose mission was to preserve in the Church of Rome the primitive Christian realization of the costliness of grace, afforded conclusive justification for the secularization of the Church. By and large, the fatal error of monasticism lay not so much in its rigorism... as in the extent to which it departed from genuine Christianity by setting up itself as the individual achievement of a select few, and so claiming a special merit of its own. (Bonhoeffer 1966, 49-50)

From a Christian perspective, the greatest flaw in Bonhoeffer’s argument is that it leaves no room for the Holy Spirit. As we have established previously, monks and hermits—at least the ones who succeed at the life—do not will themselves to a cloistered or solitary existence. They are called. Any division of the faithful in this regard is a function of differing vocations. Some are quietly beckoned to the religious life, some to the priesthood, some to married life. To argue for a uniformity of Christian response is to argue for a uniformity of vocation. Bonhoeffer errrs in his contention that a monastic setting is the only possible locale for a life of transcendent holiness. The “restricted group of specialists” can be found in all walks of life.

The second significant flaw is that Bonhoeffer’s argument is an argument about appearance, not substance. We must be careful to draw a distinction between the religious form of a life and its religious depth. Just as we can easily imagine a monastic
who lives a most holy Christian life of love and service and a member of the laity who is a Christian by baptism only, so too should we be able to imagine a lukewarm monk and a working mother who epitomizes the teachings of Christ. Any difference in the degree of success individual Christians have in following the example of Jesus does not necessarily correlate to their role in life. The former is an internal matter, the latter is an externality.

Demographically speaking, responding positively to a monastic vocation may indeed be the “individual achievement of a select few,” but statistical rarity of this sort is not the achievement that matters from a Christian perspective. The achievement that does matter deeply is the comportment of a life to the ethical standards of the faith. Granted the necessary conversion of the heart may happen in a monastery or hermitage, but there is no less chance that through diligent prayer and perseverance it may happen in a workplace or a family home. The where is incidental. It is the what that matters.

Third, is the matter of corruption. The corruption of monasticism, Bonhoeffer argues, took place as it became the gold standard of Christian devotion and piety:

Monasticism had transformed the humble work of discipleship into the meritorious activity of the saints, and the self-renunciation of discipleship into the flagrant spiritual self-assertion of the “religious.” The world had crept into the very heart of the monastic life, and was once more making havoc. The monks’s attempt to flee from the world turned out to be a subtle form of love for the world. (Bonhoeffer 1966, 50-51)

Here Bonhoeffer is describing the corruption of individuals, the actions of people burdened by sin, not the collapse of an institution or ideal. Authentic monasticism in
Luther’s time and in pre-War Europe was as viable and vital a vehicle of grace as it was at the time of Anthony and the Desert Fathers. It remains so today. The variable has always been the relative weakness of human beings. Some are called and qualified for the challenge of monastic life, many are not. The failure of those who are not does not represent a failing of monasticism any more than the failure of some to avoid car accidents represents a failing of the auto industry. (The auto industry has plenty of other failings lately.)

No doubt, there have been many reform movements within Christian monasticism in the course of Church history, but those movements were always about returning to the ideals with which the movement began: humility, prayer, love, work. These are the foundational characteristics of monasticism; they cannot be displaced or denied because of the failure of individuals to live up to them. The only course of action is for the sinful monk to recognize his shortcomings and rededicate himself to the ideal established for him by Anthony, Benedict, Basil, and Christ.

In letters written to friends and relatives while working in London as the pastor of two German congregations, Bonhoeffer called for Christendom to return to the teachings of the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel. The lessons from the Sermon on the Mount were key. In this letter from April 28, 1934 to Erwin Sutz, who had been a fellow student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Bonhoeffer lays out his opposition to the Nazi movement gaining traction in Germany and presciently outlines the coming cost:
And while I’m working with the church opposition with all my might, it’s perfectly clear to me that this opposition is only a very temporary transitional phase on the way to an opposition of a very different kind, and that very few of those involved in this preliminary skirmish are going to be there for that second struggle. I believe that all of Christendom should be praying with us for the coming of a resistance “to the point of shedding blood” [Heb 12:4] and for the finding of people who can suffer it through. Simply suffering is what it will be about, not parries, blows, or thrusts such as may still be allowed and possible in the preliminary battles; the real struggle that perhaps lies ahead must be one of simply suffering through in faith. . . . You know, it is my belief—perhaps it will amaze you—that it is the Sermon on the Mount that has the deciding word on this whole affair. . . . Please write and tell me sometime how you preach about the Sermon on the Mount. I’m currently trying to do so, to keep it infinitely plain and simple, but it always comes back to keeping the commandments and not trying to evade them. (Bonhoeffer 2007, 134)

Here some of the beginnings of his thoughts on cheap grace are evident. There is no easy Christianity for Bonhoeffer. Suffering is inherent to Christian practice, and if Christ is the exemplar for the Christian, then death is a very real possible conclusion to a life of faith.

On this subject, Merton writes that the eremitic life is a kind of lesser martyrdom, which exists on the edge of an existential abyss:

The solitary is a man who has made a decision strong enough to be proved by the wilderness: that is to say, by death. For the wilderness is full of uncertainty and peril and humiliation and fear, and the solitary lives all day long in the face of death. Hence it is clear that the solitary is the martyr’s younger brother. It is the Holy Spirit Himself Who makes the decision that segregates martyrs and solitary in Christ. (Merton 1999, 102) (my emphasis)

Only the grace of God keeps the solitary alive, that is to say, from joining the ranks of the martyrs. Bonhoeffer might argue that the martyr is dying for something outside of
himself, while the solitary “dies” for personal gain, but he would be wrong. As we have seen, the solitary’s “death” benefits at least the entire Christian community of faith, and perhaps all of humanity.

In a letter dated January 14, 1935 to his brother Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, Dietrich calls for a “new monasticism” with the Sermon on the Mount at its core:

Perhaps I seem to you rather fanatical and mad about a number of things. I myself am sometimes afraid of that. But I know that the day become more “reasonable,” to be honest, I should have to chuck my entire theology. When I first started in theology, my idea of it was quite different—rather more academic, probably. Now it has turned into something else altogether. But I do believe that at last I am on the right track, for the first time in my life. . . .I think I am right in saying that I would only achieve true inner clarity and honesty by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Here alone lies the force that can blow all this hocus-pocus sky-high—like fireworks, leaving only a few burnt out-shells behind. The restoration of the church must surely depend on a new kind of monasticism, which has nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount. I believe the time has come to gather people together and do this.

. . .Things do exist that are worth standing up for without compromise. To me it seems that peace and social justice are such things, as is Christ himself.

I recently came across the fairy tale of “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” which is really relevant for our time. All we are lacking today is the child who speaks up at the end. (Bonhoeffer 2007, 284)

While it is certainly legitimate to call for a movement like this among the laity, it seems completely inaccurate to charge that monastics have not been attempting to live according to the Sermon on the Mount all along. To make a proper judgment, closer analysis of the text and its tenets is needed.
The “Sermon on the Mount”\textsuperscript{1} is a lengthy Gospel section in which the narrative Jesus teaches an assembled crowd. Chapter Five begins with the Beatitudes, one of Christianity’s most famous sets of teachings, which lay out what sort of personality traits and behavior are considered “blessed,” or favored by God. The list includes those who are “poor in spirit,” often translated as “humble” or “dependent on God,” “those who mourn,” “the meek,” those “who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” “the merciful,” “the clean of heart,” “the peacemakers,” and the “persecuted.”

This is quite a revelation. According to the narrative Jesus, those who are blessed, those who will receive God’s favor, are those who are aware of their lowliness, those who experience sadness, those who seek to fulfill the law, those who are kind and compassionate, those who struggle against sin, those who mediate conflict, and those who suffer, particularly from the oppression of their fellow man. This last item is heavily emphasized by Bonhoeffer. For him, practicing Christian ethics in the world necessarily involves struggle and suffering. There is an inherent cost to following Jesus in an authentic way, and that cost is not insignificant.

While the cost may seem frightening, the tradition has held from the beginning that, in another of the omnipresent paradoxes of the Christian faith, living the tenets is an “easy burden” and a “light yoke.” In fact, according to the Gospels, it ultimately represents a complete emancipation from worldly concerns. Taken up, this burden causes one to lose one’s life and then to find it.

\textsuperscript{1} Matthew 5:3-7:27
The second part of Matthew’s Chapter Five lays out a new and daunting goal: perfection. The narrative Jesus concludes, “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Prior to that, Jesus explains to the assembled crowd that “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). Righteousness, in the Hebrew tradition, is the condition of comporting ones behavior and actions to the Mosaic law, but Jesus is not calling for his followers to follow the law better than members of the established Jewish sects, rather he is calling for an expansion of the law itself.

The narrative Jesus explains that the scope of the law must be widened to govern not just action, but the thoughts and emotions that inspire sin. No longer is it sufficient to avoid murdering someone. The new precept is to avoid anger, short-temperedness, and name calling. No longer is it sufficient to avoid adultery. Now the faithful must not look at one another lustfully. Jesus is keen that people avoid the root causes of sinful behavior.

The standard of personal conduct is also elevated in other ways. As the psalms clearly indicate, it was acceptable to demonstrate great loathing for enemies and evil-doers. Jesus now teaches that enemies are to be loved, the other cheek is to be turned. The evangelist has Jesus give more examples of how the faithful are always to exceed the expectations of others, going beyond what is asked for.

This is a call to selflessness. Self-interest and personal desire have no place in the ethical norms laid out by the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel. The faithful are charged to
answer one question, a godly question, perhaps a perfect question, “How can I best
demonstrate love to each person I encounter?”

Chapter Six begins straightaway with a warning that will be emphasized
repeatedly: The faithful are not to demonstrate their righteousness publically. They are
not to make a spectacle of their good deeds. In fact, they should be secretive about
them. The narrative Jesus gives examples of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting; in all
cases, these acts are done discreetly and are matters between the faithful and God alone.

Next Matthew’s Jesus teaches the faithful a prayer. This prayer, known as the
Lord’s Prayer, or the Our Father, is a cornerstone of the Christian faith. It simply asks
that God’s will for the world be fulfilled, that the Kingdom of Heaven be made manifest
on earth. Realizing that human beings are potential agents of the divine will, the prayer
continues, asking that the reciters be strengthened for their work, mindful of
forgiveness, and protected from trials, temptation, and sin. The narrative Jesus is clear
that there is no benefit in lengthy, convoluted prayer. He offers this new petition as an
easy, streamlined alternative.

The chapter concludes with two more significant messages. First, the faithful
should not concern themselves with amassing wealth or the transitory things of this life.
This passage mirrors the Buddha’s teaching on the impermanence of worldly
possessions. The narrative Jesus explains that such a focus represents a failure in setting
priorities. Instead, the faithful should “store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth
nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal” (Matthew 6:20). It is only by being
agents of love that the faithful will avoid the disappointment inherent in a life focused on “things.”

The evangelist naturally moves then to a passage on trust in God. The faithful are ultimately to avoid worry. Matthew’s Jesus explains at length that God will provide, and that just as God provides for “the birds in the sky,” God will provide for his people. Their focus should not be on tomorrow, but on today. Their trust should be complete.

Chapter Seven takes a sterner tone as Matthew’s Jesus lays out a series of warnings. In the beginning the faithful are admonished not to be judgmental. The narrative Jesus teaches his audience to avoid hypocrisy and to focus on changing their own lives before taking corrective measures in the lives of others. He reminds the crowd to petition God always, for God is like a Father who knows how to give gifts to his children.

There is then a quick mention of the Golden Rule, and a metaphor of the two ways: the wide gate to destruction entered by many and the narrow gate to life found by few. The faithful are warned of false prophets who will be recognized by the fruit their teachings bear.

Lastly, the Jesus of Matthew’s Gospel sets up two dichotomies, drawing distinctions between three courses of action. The first is between those who speak the right words and those who act. Some, he says, will call him “Lord, Lord,” but will not do “the will of my Father in heaven.” They will not receive their reward. The second distinction is between those who listen to the teachings and those who listen and act on
them. According to the narrative Jesus, the latter group will be favored. Here the “Sermon on the Mount” concludes.

These are the fundamental Gospel teachings by which Dietrich Bonhoeffer would have all Christians live. It is difficult to find any way in which a monastic or eremitic vocation conflicts with these tenets. To begin, it seems clear that monks are not excluded from the traits praised in the Beatitudes. Monks certainly are called to lives of humility and dependence on God, they have periods in their lives of mourning and sadness, they strive to be meek or egoless, they desire righteousness, mercy, cleanliness of heart, and peace. They suffer periods of persecution. Monastics, like any Christians, struggle to live the lives of holiness to which they are called. Their withdrawal into community or solitary life does not obviate them from that responsibility. In many ways, it makes it more difficult.

The cenobite or anchorite too must always ask himself what we have called the perfect question, “How can I best demonstrate love for each person I encounter?” As quoted earlier, St. Benedict writes that the monastery be “a school for the Lord’s service” (Benedict 1998, 5). Monks must treat other monks according to a Christian ethic. We have already seen that an anchorite’s existence is far less isolated than conventionally believed. He must receive visitors and seekers in a Christian manner.

Obviously these men are practicing their attempts at righteousness in secret. They have gone so far as to withdraw from the world in a significant way, in order to focus more completely on living the sort of life laid out in the Sermon on the Mount.
Renown or recognition is not part of their calculus. Granted, it could be said that in the case of someone like Thomas Merton, notoriety found him. But he certainly did not withdraw from the world and enter a monastery in order to become famous.

Clearly too the monastic is not attempting to hoard earthly possessions. Members of most orders take a vow of poverty and own very little personal property at all. Communal living in a monastery or solitary withdrawal to a hermitage largely removes both the temptation and ability to find enjoyment playing with the latest consumer toys. Not only are monks unexposed to the media and the incessant barrage of advertising present in most of society, their leisure time revolves around reading, prayer, and walking rather than surfing the Internet, driving their sports car, or sitting down in front of a giant flat panel TV to scroll through the four hundred plus channels on their satellite service.

So too does the monastic trust profoundly in God. He has turned his life over to God in a complete way. In a radically counter-cultural move, the monk has eschewed those things that society teaches are worthwhile and fulfilling. Instead he has put all his eggs in God’s basket, as it were; he has made a gift of his life, asking God to make him a servant of love.

To be clear, while monastic life and withdrawal have always been a form of social critique and a rejection of certain cultural flaws, it has never in its history been a rejection of fellow human beings. Merton writes:
Withdrawal from other men can be a special form of love for them. It should never be a rejection of man or of his society. But it may well be a quiet and humble refusal to accept the myths and fictions with which the social life cannot help but be full—especially today. To despair of the illusions and facades which man builds around himself is certainly not to despair of man. On the contrary, it may be a sign of love and hope. For when we love someone we refuse to tolerate what destroys and maims his personality. If we love mankind, can we bind ourselves to man’s predicament? You will say: we must do something about his predicament. But there are some whose vocation is to realize that they, at least, cannot help in any overt social way. Their contribution is a mute witness, a secret and even invisible expression of love which takes the form of their own option for solitude in preference to the acceptance of social fictions. For is not our involvement in fiction, particularly in political and demagogic fiction, an implicit confession that we despair of man, and even of God? (France 1996, 177) (my emphasis)

People are always willing to take great risks and make profound sacrifices for the ones they love. Relinquishing everything and trusting God to transform oneself into an agent for God’s love no doubt qualifies. The monk does both for all of humanity.

By virtue of his special vantage point set against the norm, the hermit may also have unique insight into the societal problems he seeks to transcend. His solitude affords him a perspective to which people immersed in the world have no access. Peter France writes:

By retreating into his hermitage, Merton was not cutting himself off from contemporary problems, but hoping to be able to consider them more deeply and to speak on them with authority. He [Merton] wrote: “A contemplative will, then, concern himself with the same problems as other people, but he will try to get at the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems—not by analysis but by simplicity.” (France 1996, 186)
It is this paper’s main argument that the insights gained by withdrawal must then be shared with those seeking to effect change.

Indeed, Merton’s withdrawal gave him insight into the problem with which we began, namely what is the purpose of withdrawal and why are many so suspicious of it? Merton contrasts the way in which monasticism has evolved since the time of the Desert Fathers:

Whereas in the fourth century monks were determined to prove their solitude charismatic by showing it to be beyond the human, the situation today is quite the reverse. . . The hermit exists today to realize and experience in himself the ordinary values of a life lived with the minimum of artificiality. Such a life will from the beginning seem itself artificial because it is so completely unlike the lives of other people. (France 1996, 187)

Among many other things, the monk trusts that God will allow the monk to serve as an example. A life of withdrawal, first to simplicity and then to love, represents an alternative to the hollow memes created by the false self.

In addition to being a life of profound trust, monastic life is also a life of constant petition. Five or six times a day, the monk stops his work for periods of prayer. He may go to the church and pray communally with his monastic brothers, he may return to his hermitage and pray alone. Either way he comes to God in a series of codified sessions designed to remind him Who should always be at the center of his life.

This system of monastic prayer, called the Divine Office, makes extensive use of the Psalms. The Psalms are at once delighted and angry, faithful and doubting, joyous and embittered. They run the gamut of human emotions, always acknowledging
the less holy sentiments human beings feel. They are also primarily prayers of petition. In case after case, the psalmist is directly addressing God, asking God for an outcome or some sort of response to his need, often pleading for a resolution. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). A monk spends much of his waking life asking God to bless him and the world at large. Here the Gospel of Matthew is clear: a life of divine petition with confidence in God’s agency is a life of righteousness.

This tradition of intercessory prayer is central to monastic life. As mentioned at the conclusion of the section on Dom Carlyle’s *Our Purpose and Method*, monks are professional pray-ers. Five or six times a day, they offer their prayers not just for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the world. In fact, their entire life, all that they do, becomes a prayer. This is part of their attempt to follow the advice in Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians when he writes, “Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 16-17). The monastic community and the anchorite devoutly wish that their efforts in this regard are not merely of benefit to themselves, but to all of God’s creation.

To address the next section of the Sermon on the Mount, monastic withdrawal is clearly an attempt to enter the narrow gate. It is by definition a departure from the broad road travelled by most, a rejection of many societal norms and expectations, a method by which those things deemed unessential or distracting are eliminated from one’s life. If, as Abbot Carlyle explained, the religious believes that his life is God’s, “purchased
at a price” by the sacrifice of Christ, then it is logically consistent to reduce one’s life to those things believed to be most highly favored by that God, namely: prayer, honest work, love of fellow human beings. It is indeed another Christian paradox that this simple, trinitarian list of life’s ultimate responsibilities is profoundly freeing. Prayer, work, and love have the potential to broaden the narrow road into a superhighway of divine access. It is a central Christian belief that God does not desire the road to be narrow, it is only human stubbornness and ignorance that make it so.

So too is monastic withdrawal an attempt not just to listen or speak but to act, to respond in faith to the incessant yet whispered calling of God. In fact, can there be a more radical or revolutionary action than to turn from those things which the dominant culture champions as the most valuable? Can there be a riskier political action than the rejection of the accepted norms? The monk is man of action for sure. He turns from wealth, power, prestige, sex, family, and towards prayer, work, and love. Divine madness, indeed. “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39).

It seems in the end that Bonhoeffer’s criticism of monasticism is a condemnation of some overfed and licentious abbot of the Middle Ages—sitting in a grand monastery surrounded by thousands of hectares of fertile fields and dependent villages—or the corrupt sarabaites and gyrovagues condemned by Benedict in the first chapter of his Rule (Benedict 1998, 7). However, Bonhoeffer’s critique fails to gain any traction vis a vis the authentic monastic lives of history or personal experience. From
Saint Anthony to Thomas Merton to Brother Xavier, there is no anchorite who is either failing to live according to Sermon on the Mount or in need of a “new monasticism.”

The old model, understood correctly, continues to work just fine.
CONCLUSION

In the end then, both the cenobite and anchorite are men and women who have responded faithfully to the love of God. Both are men who have lost their life in order to find it. And while their practice of the corporeal works of mercy is likely limited to their fellow monks and retreatants or seekers, they practice the spiritual acts of mercy for the entire world. They are deeply engaged in the welfare of mankind despite their withdrawal or isolation; the focus of their lives demands it.

Dom Carlyle made it clear that the monk is profoundly engaged in the world by virtue of his love of God. One of the ways in which that love of God manifests itself is as a love of His creation. Other human beings are God’s greatest creation; the monk loves them as such.

The abbot also argued that monasticism is a response to a calling, a response to God’s love. It is a form of religious concentration not eccentricity. The monk’s life is a reaction to the Christian message and indeed gospel ethics. It is the logical outcome of following the example of Jesus. As Merton says, it is a joyous sort of lesser martyrdom in which a man or woman decides that their life’s work will be as complete a giving over of their life to God as he or she can make.

Lastly, Dom Carlyle explained that monastics are professional pray-ers. An essential part of their life is to praise God and pray for the welfare of the world almost
continuously. In fact, they seek to become a living prayer, to sanctify every activity of their lives. Their other vital task, as Merton clearly develops, is to act as conduits of grace in the world. Both of these jobs are, at their essence, other-focused. They are selfless occupations which have at their core the desire to improve the lives of other human beings.

Belden Lane writes convincingly on the practicalities of this sort of work. First, it has historically taken place in vast areas of hostile wilderness. The silence of the desert or mountaintop has been a prerequisite for the consistent and deep encounter of God. In these locations, the men and women ready to undertake a life of this kind of service can most readily experience the divine love which initially masquerades as indifference.

Vital to this vocation is a dependence on emptiness, on letting go. Usually after an arduous and lengthy period of prayer and trial, the false self that accrues over a lifetime falls away, and is replaced by a mysterious peace, calm, equanimity, and sense of love, which many who have undergone this experience describe as a direct encounter with the divine. The monastic then begins to mediate this way of being to those around him.

It is by virtue of this “success” that the anchorite too loses his life to find it, in that he becomes a locus for pilgrimage, e.g., Brother Xavier. Initially the monk was bidden to withdraw, but all along the ultimate purpose of that withdrawal was a joyous return in order to act as a vehicle for grace. To be sure, the return is not necessarily a
physical one, but it must involve an availability to and degree of involvement in the lives of others.

Lane was also helpful in addressing the forms that meditative prayer may take, drawing a distinction between schools in Church tradition which advocated a more radical abandonment of all images on the one hand and an apophaticism clearly grounded in Christology on the other. What emerged from our analysis is that both schools have great merit and inform each other’s practice, and that, as in most things, striking a mean between the two is undoubtedly the best course.

The most important contribution of Thomas Merton to this paper is his insistence on the solitary’s involvement with the world. Ironically, the true solitary cannot consistently isolate himself from his fellow man according to Merton. He argues for the absolute necessity of return, of becoming a conduit of grace in the world; though this process of returning does not progress in a linear fashion. As Jesus modeled, the authentic Christian anchorite is not first there in isolation, then here in community. Rather he is in a constant state of withdrawal and return, fortifying himself in solitude with God, coming into the world to mediate God’s love, over and over again.

Merton argues that there must always be a “going out to others” in love. This openness needn’t involve physical movement or even physical proximity. It is difficult for some to swallow, but a group of men rising before dawn in a wilderness canyon to sing ancient Jewish liturgical songs has profound benefit for all the world, according to the tradition. This practice too is a “going out to others” in love.
Merton also holds that the discernment of Gospel ethics and their application is best done in quiet solitary prayer. The faithful are best able to discern the proper course of action when they sit and meditate on the love of God. Other benefits of solitary prayer according to Merton are spiritual awakening, increased sensitivity to inspiration, renewed faith, courage, perseverance, and patience. All are godly traits, all are the byproducts of a life of prayerful withdrawal.

Like Lane, Merton advocates for true perspective vis a vis illusory and selfish “reality.” The desert and contemplative prayer are of supreme value in gaining this perspective, yet there are significant emotional, mental, and spiritual risks inherent in undertaking the work. It is not a task to be entered into lightly, nor without some experience in prayer and the guidance of an expert. Merton is also clear that such a project is dependent on hope and a childlike faith. These traits are the firm foundation of any true “letting go.”

Lastly, it was important to address the critiques of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. No person of faith can doubt Bonhoeffer’s spiritual strength or question the depth of his commitment to living a Christian life. His actions in the face of terrible injustice and persecution speak for themselves. This paper only seeks to recast this particular aspect of his religious thought.

Bonhoeffer argues three main points: First, that monasticism unhealthily divides the faithful by holding a select few to a greater standard. Second, that as an institution monasticism became corrupted. And third, that what is needed in Christianity is a “new
monasticism” which would mean “following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount.”

Regarding the first argument, the ultimate standard is the same for all Christians: the loss of self in love and service to the “other.” In terms of where and how this happens, the faithful have always been and will always be divided. Uniformity is an illusion; a “variety of religious experience” (William James) and a variety of vocations will always be the case. It is fine and good to say that all Christians should devote their lives fully to their faith, but it is wrong to decree one form of a devoted life superior to another. The standard is indeed the same; how the loss of self occurs is up to God and the individual believer. Some may become monks, some hermits, some married men and women. Regardless of their station in life, all Christians are called to serve God and love their fellow human beings. There is no greater standard than this, and surely no vocation that insures it is more easily met.

Regarding Bonhoeffer’s second critique, it is the position of ethical monotheism generally and this paper specifically, that human beings are corrupt and sinful. As a result of this condition, any human institution—including monastic orders and the Church itself—is imperfect and prone to error. That does not mean that the ideals upon which those institutions were founded are any less valuable or true. It simply means that the human members of said institutions will frequently fail to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. From a Christian perspective, this is not an implication of those goals, merely an indication of human weakness and dependence on God.
Lastly, this paper holds that historical/traditional monasticism, practiced properly, does a fine job of “following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount.” If we interpret Bonhoeffer’s call to mean that all Christians should familiarize themselves with various monastic charisms in an attempt to choose one to emulate in their own lives, a sort of Christianity-wide call to the life of an oblate, then grand, but there is no reason to reinvent the wheel. There is no need for a “new monasticism,” just a return to the core principals set out by monasticism’s early practitioners and founders. Granted, monastic history is full of reformers beginning new orders, but the goal was never a “new monasticism” per se. It was always an attempt to return faithfully to the proven tenets of old.

In closing, the dichotomy between monastic withdrawal and engagement is ultimately non-existent. Not only is the hermit’s isolation regularly interrupted by those who seek his counsel, but the hermit constantly prays for others when he is alone. When asked about this Brother Xavier, the hermit attached to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, said, “My family and the world? I feel closer than I did before. They are always in my prayers.”

Some may reject this sort of “spiritual proximity” as inferior to physical presence. It is very difficult for a non-believer or agnostic to understand the benefit or power of this sort of prayer and presence. I am reminded of James Cowan quoting St. Anselm who wrote, “I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I might understand.” Anselm continued, “Those who try to understand before they
believe are like bats that, seeing only the sky at night, presume to argue with eagles about the midday sun” (Cowan 2006, 206). In no way is this meant to be dismissive, only to point out that there is a wide ontological gulf which is difficult to bridge.

In the end though, monks are present to their fellow human beings in profound ways. While some may doubt the efficacy of intercessory prayer—the advantage of being held in the mind and heart of a loving stranger far away—no one can argue with the tangible benefit of carefully reading an inspired eremitic text, having an audience with a wise confessor, or sharing a moment of love, compassion, or joy. Peter France writes, “The whole tradition of solitaries across the cultures has been, as we have seen, a retreat to acquire insights which are then passed on” (France 1996, 190) (my emphasis). This “passing on” must happen via human contact and God’s grace.

Even the Carthusians, who receive no retreatants and are almost completely closed to the outside world, have three periods of collective prayer per day and their weekly hike as a community. St. Bruno, the order’s founder, knew that the monks must have a time of “return,” a time in which they might practice the ethics of the Gospel to people present before them. To be sure, monks demonstrate their love of the world through the divine office and the thousands of intercessory prayers they make in the course of a liturgical year, but even Bruno, the creator of perhaps the most austere and demanding form of monastic life, knew that the monk must regularly convey the unconditional love of God to his fellow man in person: face to face, and heart to heart.
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