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## Box 07, Folder 35 - "Hermits" (Bro. Gregory Studite Monk)

Edwin Mortimer Standing

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The absence of hermits as a recognised and esteemed element in the life of the Church for the last century or two is an extraordinary phenomenon, for in other ages hermits have always been numerous and accepted. This is not merely that eremitical vocations are lacking; they possibly exist in numbers; but is in part at least to be attributed to the general attitude of suspicion with which the eremitical life is viewed. In the West there is no legal provision made for hermits in canon law, and the difficulties of a religious or priest embracing the eremitical life are practically insuperable. Spiritual writers rarely treat of eremiticism as a means or state of perfection, and it tends to be regarded as a thing of the past which has no place in the Church today.

There are, however, not lacking signs that this state of affairs may be passing away. The example of Charles de Foucauld and the spiritual personality of St. Therese of the Child Jesus are turning minds to the possibilities of the life of an anchorite and many writings on the subject are beginning to appear. The French *Vie Spirituelle* for October, 1952, published a symposium on the subject of Blessed Solitude, and the present article is merely a gleaning from the many valuable insights and opinions there expressed (especially from the article signed S) and an attempt to coordinate them.

From St. Thomas Aquinas, in the only place where he treats explicitly of the subject (II-II, 187, 8), solitude is a more powerful instrument of contemplative perfection than community life, on condition that the person entering it has already acquired a considerable degree of perfection, and that normally by some kind of community or social life. While two of the essential means of perfection of the religious life, poverty and chastity, are carried to an extreme, the third, obedience, is radically altered, in that actual obedience is no longer necessary; the solitary is led by the Holy Spirit. But he has perfect obedience in readiness of mind to obey (ibid, ad. 3). The difference between religious life and eremitical life lies thus in this characteristic of liberty of spirit, which alone is essential, and to which the ever variable elements of solitude, simplicity of life, extreme asceticism and humility are secondary.

The liberty of spirit sought by the hermit supposes an acquired perfection of the love of God and the neighbour: in other words it is far removed from seeking of independence in order to do his own will, nor solitude in order to get away from man, but so that he may do God's will and adhere to it more perfectly. False eremiticism, which merely seeks to shake off restraints, has been frequent enough and has largely contributed to throw the life of solitude into disrepute; but wrongly, for true eremiticism is quite different. The genuine vocation to a hermit's life will hardly look on it as a higher perfection, but as an unfortunate necessity presenting itself to him as an imperative demand from God, to be tested and submitted to advice and to the decisions of authority, and eventually to be embraced with uncertainty and amid adverse criticisms and reproaches, with great practical obstacles and rending of ties. It is an inhuman, or rather superhuman, means of perfection, the fullest practical acknowledgment of the claims of the super-natural and of God.

Not a spirit of personal independence and a weariness with social life or the yoke of obedience, then, but a desire to be completely and immediately at the disposal of God, lies at the root of eremiticism. The New Law of grace is an internal and living one in the soul, and in its fullest development supposes that the individual is led directly by the spirit of God. While the Spirit will lead many along ways not so diverse from those of the less perfect, and incline to seek the will of God and union with God in the framework of some form of social life, and consequently in law and obedience to law, it is yet only to be expected that there will be vocations to a state of life in which God is the only or almost the only guide, and in which the intervention of human superiors and laws is kept to a minimum, and in which the only society is God himself.

For all social life and its necessary laws involve limitations to individual ways of perfection which it will sometimes be the good pleasure of the Spirit to transcend. It is therefore likely that, just as the normal and natural vocation to marriage is transcended by supernatural grace and gives rise to the state of consecrated chastity, so the natural social life of man will sometimes be transcended by a call to a state of solitude. This is a better state, in the same way that consecrated chastity is a better state than marriage, only because it means union with God.

The eremitical life thus appears as an extreme means to the perfection of the contemplative life, and the ideal and norm of monasticism. All contemplative orders, and most others, tend to renew themselves in the course of history by a renewed contact with the eremitical life, and it has played its part as a temporary measure in the lives of many active saints. The only alternative summit presented is that of episcopal perfection, the fullness of contemplation overflowing in action, and the relations between this and eremitical perfection would require a special study to themselves.

Supernatural grace and the possibility of contemplative union with God in this life lead us therefore to expect hermit vocations. But it is particular circumstances which usually determine their fulfilment. Religious life is intended to guard true liberty of spirit, and to make it easy for the many. But religious life itself does tend, like every society, to standardise itself and to multiply laws and to build up a framework that becomes a bond on spiritual liberty and produces an artificial spontaneity, one which acts only to obey laws and to conform to them. When the whole tendency of the world is to greater and greater standardisation and regulation of the individual, as well as to greater concentration on active works, it is not surprising if desires for greater spiritual liberty and for conditions favourable to the contemplative life arise. In the genuine eremitical vocation it is not because the person is incapable of renouncing self-will in obedience that he seeks independence, but because only so can he serve Christ completely, as seems to him imperative. This problem is found in all the spheres of religious life. In poverty, where the actual poverty practised will be found (as in the case of Charles de Foucauld and the Trappists) to be insufficient to quench the thirst for having God alone for nakes following of the naked Christ. In social and community life, where reputation, clerical and religious status, social and economic advantage and the organised world of the community seem to be a barrier to complete renunciation of all but God. In prayer, where even the organised choir office may seem to become an impediment. In obedience, which, though perfect and entire, seems to limit the calls of the grace of God.

It is therefore evident that eremiticism is a different vocation from that of the religious life, though it is one which may be expected to arise most often within religious life, especially in the monastic orders, or in those such as the Carmelites with a positive eremitical tradition. But for such a religious it is really a change of vocations, and one for which there is at present hardly any provision. It is a different and more exacting means of perfection, consisting centrally in liberty of spirit, but with certain constant, though in themselves exceedingly variable, external characteristics, which will now be examined.

The names of hermit and anchorite come from the idea of fleeing the world and seeking solitude. Yet the vocation to solitude can be fulfilled within a framework of community life, and under a strict rule of life and prayer, as among the Carthusians and Camaldulense. But for the true hermit or anchorite the solitude required is one which excludes social and regular community life. It is the full renunciation of all the social constituents of the personality: of reputation, the esteem of others, knowing and being known, giving and receiving, and it is the constitution of a new social milieu: God. The hermit is thus essentially one who seeks to be unknown and forgotten. It is contradictory to set up as a hermit with the idea of being known as such and honoured for it. The very utility of the eremitical life to the rest of the world as a graphic sign of the demands of God depends on the fact that the hermits themselves do their very best to be unknown and despised. Solitude is the last liberation of the soul, when it is now free to serve God completely and directly, without concern for others. To be known, still more to be esteemed, is a limitation which prevents full liberty of spirit. Many things in the way of penance and prayer are possible when no one is there to see them and singularity has not to be guarded against.

This solitude can take on many forms: the traditional one of the desert, still attractive by its very harshness and brilliance; the solitude of hermits of woods, caves, mountains and lonely hermitages; that of those who seek and find solitude in the anonymity of life in a great city, or who find it in some abandoned and despised state of life like St. Benedict Joseph Labre. There is no regular pattern: each is unique in his own way. But all must, on one way or another, be separated from the society of men and be alone with God.

Since to be forgotten by men is necessary, humiliat is in a peculiar way the foundation of eremiticism. The hermit must take the last place. As such he has no position in the Church, as cleric or religious, at the risk of reconstructing the human milieu. He must only have God. Indeed the hermit needs an alibi in

order to set out to be a hermit. If he seeks a higher perfection than that of cenobit, or if he sets out to save the world by his prayers, he will be a failure as a hermit. He must be liberated even from the good things of the social life of the Church and religious life, and not clothe himself with any milieu than God. He will usually have to escape by an alibi: to embrace eremiticism by reason of some failure or check that seems to leave the way of solitude open as the only way out of a difficulty.

The candidate for the desert is someone who seeks no position and no honour and is convinced of his own insufficiency. He will usually not lack those who assure him that he is on wrong track, and will most likely be regarded as a deserter by any group to which he has belonged. He can never be sure that he will persevere. He cannot emulate the feats of the ancient hermits, and many need holidays from his profession. He may, like many hermits of the past, be led into some form of apostolic life after a period of retreat. It is a precarious and risky vocation, which deserves commiseration and help from those engaged in a more stable way.

The desire for God alone naturally leads to an extreme of the spirit of poverty, the product of the gift of fear. The mystical life of contemplation proceeds from the gifts of the Holy Ghost, and mounts from fear of the Lord to wisdom. Its foundation is a supreme appreciation of God's transcendent goodness in Himself and to us, and consequently a refusal to rest in any created thing. Eremiticism carries this to the most extreme degree possible to an individual, and rejoices in the absence of all created supports for the personality so that it may be forced to rest upon God alone and may be sure that it is doing so. The greatest simplicity will be sought in everything. The subjection of the body by penance will also be carried to a high degree, facilitated by the absence of witnesses. All the humility, penance, simplicity, stripping of creatures and adherence to God alone must be genuine and sincere, and in no way a performance before an imaginary audience or an heroic sacrifice for others. Otherwise it fails to attain its end which is total stripping so as to have God alone. It is easy to reconstitute what has been thrown aside.

The end and purpose of it all is to live with God in continuous prayer. In the details of daily life and prayer the essential liberty of the eremitic state will necessarily manifest itself. In general anything like choral office will not serve, since it brings back community life. For though it is possible for hermits to live in groups and loose federations, it is contradictory to have a community of hermits. Nevertheless the hermit rejoins the community of the Church in God. In fact the purely solitary hermit is almost non-existent. His very contemplation forces him to perform some apostolic work for others with whom he comes into necessary contact. But again this is only a genuine product of his eremiticism if it is not sought and not wanted, and if God is only left for God's sake. He will pray for others, but again not as if his prayers were better than theirs, but because he thinks that it is all he is good for. An eremitical vocation may often be the result of a subjective disillusionment and dissatisfaction with an apparently very successful religious or apostolic life: a realisation that the work being done is immensely imperfect, that much harm is being done by the imperfection of the worker, and that the only solution is to take refuge in God who alone remains. There the priest or religious who esteems himself so unsuccessful can do no harm, and may do some little good.

The eremitical life is therefore a genuine state of perfection, though difficult to define and still more difficult to regulate. Its perils and risks are many. It seems necessary that it should be given some juridical status and some stability, if it is to be a state into which persons can normally be directed. In the past there have been -- and indeed there still -- are hermits making their profession to the bishop, and federations and groups of hermits under some kind of ecclesiastical supervision. The Carmelites and some others have their "deserts" where a hermit's life can be led under authority. The new canons for the Eastern Churches define a hermit as a 'religious who, in accordance with the statutes, leads an anchoritic life, remaining in dependence on the Superiors of his Religious Institute.' It is also laid down that the laws for religious apply to hermits unless the contrary is apparent from the nature of the case or from the statutes of a particular Religious Institute (can. 4 and 313, 4). In the definition of Religious in can. 1 no mention is made of common life as is done in the Western Codex. It is evidently on these lines that a jurisdiction for hermits could be worked out in the Western Church, should opinion become more favourable and vocations more frequent. For as the notion of a state of perfection has been

extended to Secular Institutes on the active side, so may it be possible to extend it to include hermits with their peculiar needs. This will be a new and distinct species of state and perfection, differing from the religious state excluding common life, and from the Secular Institute in being contemplative.

The practical possibilities of the development of eremitical vocations are, however, severely limited by existing law and practice in the West. Though it is possible for an individual priest or religious to obtain concessions from a favourable superior to lead an eremitical life, this is very uncertain and unsatisfactory, and prevents the development of eremitical vocations in the clerical and religious life which is the traditional ground for them. The only alternative seems to be secularisation. For although the genuine vocation can do much to cultivate the spirit of solitude even in common life, and many can find their place in such orders as the Carthusians, any cenobitical solitude is never equivalent to eremitical. Only genuine actual prolonged solitude can bring the vocation to full fruition. This can hardly appear on any large scale within the framework of existing orders as an individual exception. Some sort of quasi-organised eremitical life, with some stability and a minimum of regulation is necessary.

If this is to be possible it will be necessary to make the transition from the vocation of a religious to that of a hermit reasonably possible, a change which requires not merely a change of law but much more, a change of general outlook on the subject among religious.

Given the possibility of suitable initial vocations being drawn from among religious, it might then be possible in time to go on to the direct enrolment of hermits into a very great variety of groups and orders of hermits, whose anchoretical liberty would remain as intact as is reconcilable with prudence, and who would lead their life under authoritative supervision, with some not very detailed rule, and with the vows that give them stability of profession. Such groups would have to be small and various, lest standardisation return. Many might arise under the aegis of existing Religious Orders or Third Orders: others under the inspiration of individual hermits such as Charles de Foucauld.