

The Cell

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A brother asked one of the Elders saying: What shall I do, Father, for I work none of the works of a monk but here I am in torpor eating and drinking and sleeping and in bad thoughts and in plenty of trouble, going from one struggle to another and from thoughts to thoughts. Then the old man said: Just you stay in your cell and cope with all this as best you can without being disturbed by it. I would like to think that the little you are able to do is nevertheless not unlike the great things that Abba Anthony did on the mountain, and I believe that if you sit in your cell for the Name of God and if you continue to seek the knowledge of Him, you too will find yourself in the place of Abba Anthony.¹

This variant of a classic Desert Father saying emphasizes that the most important thing for the solitary is to be a solitary, to 'sit in his cell' because the cell will 'teach him all things.' Everything else is secondary. The relative unimportance of all other practices is suggested by this hyperbolic and somewhat outrageous statement. We must not interpret this saying to mean that asceticism is discounted. But fasting, vigils and so on are seen in their proper relation to solitude and prayer.

The right order of things in the solitary life is this: everything is centered on union with God in prayer and solitude. Therefore the most important 'ascetic practice' is solitude itself, and 'sitting' alone in the silence of the cell. This patient subjection to loneliness, emptiness, exile from the world of other men, and direct confrontation with the baffling mystery of God sets the tone, so to speak, for all other actions of the solitary. Without this clear acceptance of solitude in its most naked exigencies, the other practices might confuse the issue, or obscure the true end of the solitary life, or even become escapes from it. Once solitude itself is fully accepted, the other practices — fasting, work, vigils, psalmody and so on — gradually fall into place, their need and their efficacy being now properly understood in relation to the whole of 'life in the cell'. Then asceticism which at first seems difficult or even impossible, gradually comes to be more easy and even welcome. Each one in fact has his own measure, and 'sitting in the cell' devoting himself to prayer and the search for God, he will, if he is patient and can accept a certain amount of trial and error in the beginning, finally discover the measure of discipline which he himself requires. The Desert Fathers were quite flexible in this regard, though in principle their asceticism was very severe.

To 'sit in the cell' and to 'learn from the cell' evidently means first of all learning *that one is not a monk*. That is why the elder in this story did not take the admissions of the disciple too seriously. They showed him, in fact, that the disciple was beginning to learn, and that he was actually opening up to the fruitful lessons of solitude. But in the disciple's own mind, this experience was so defeating and confusing that he could only interpret it in one way: as a sign that he was not called to this kind of life. In fact, in any vocation at all, we must distinguish the grace of the call itself and the preliminary image of ourselves which we spontaneously and almost unconsciously assume to represent the truth of our calling. Sooner or later this image must be destroyed and give place to the concrete reality of the vocation *as lived* in the actual mysterious plan of God, which necessarily contains many elements we could never have foreseen. Thus 'sitting in the cell' means learning the fatuity and hollowness of this illusory image, which was nevertheless necessary from a human point of view and played a certain part in getting us into the desert.

Another apothegm in the same collection represents a disciple complaining to an Abba: 'My thoughts torment me saying you cannot fast or work, at least go and visit the sick for this also is love.' The Elder replies, 'Go on, eat, drink, sleep, only do not leave your cell.' (Note that the Greek words here are interesting: the word for visiting the sick is *episkopein*, 'looking them over as if one were a bishop' we would be inclined to say. The word for leaving the cell is *apostatein*, with implications for us which we know well.) The Elder explains: 'For the patient bearing of the cell sets the monk in his right place in the order of things (*taxis*).'²

Afflicted with boredom and hardly knowing what to do with himself, the disciple represents to himself a more fruitful and familiar way of life, in which he appears to himself to 'be someone' and to have a fully recognizable and acceptable identity, a 'place in the Church', but the Elder tells him that his place in the Church will never be found by following these ideas and images of a plausible identity. Rather it is found by traveling a way that is new and disconcerting because it has never been imagined by us before, or at least we have never conceived it as useful or even credible for a true Christian — a way in which we seem to lose our identity and become nothing. Patiently putting up with the incomprehensible unfulfillment of the lonely, confined, silent, obscure life of the cell, we gradually find our place, the spot where we belong as monks: that is of course solitude, the cell itself. This implies a kind of mysterious awakening to the fact *that where we actually are is where we belong*, namely in solitude, in the cell. Suddenly we see 'this is it.'

In this particular story, the disciple, driven by sheer boredom, finds some palm leaves, and as if playing around discovers how to split them and weave them together into a basket. Then he teaches himself to wait and not eat until he has finished a certain amount of work, and he fits his 'little psalms' into the framework of order that is taking shape and so 'by little steps he entered into his order (*taxis*). In so doing, he also gained confidence in his struggle with his inner drives [*logismoi* or thoughts] and overcame them.'

With the boredom of the disoriented life comes also *akedia*, or the discouragement, disgust and lassitude which, says one of the Elders, are the sign and the effect of a certain basic ignorance.³ Ignorance of what? The old man told the disciple: 'You do not have your eye on the *akme* (this has both a temporal and a spatial implication: it is at once the 'real point' and the 'moment of truth', considered as the 'aim' to which we tend in our daily practice) and you do not see the rest that is the object of our hope nor the future punishment' (for failure in this great work). If the disciple only *saw* all this then even 'if your cell were crawling with worms to the point that you were up to your neck in them, you would still bear it patiently without *akedia*.'

Another famous saying: 'The cell of the hermit is the furnace of Babylon in which the three children found the Son of God and the Pillar of cloud in which God spoke to Moses.'⁴

St. Peter Damian⁵ develops this theme rhetorically. In the cell, the hermit fights down the flames of the Babylonian furnace by prayer and faith. There the flames of temptation burn away the bonds by which his limbs are tied without in the least affecting or harming him. The ropes dissolve in fire and the hermit bursts into a song of praise of the Lord who has freed him: 'Dirupisti, Domine, vincula mea' (Ps. 105). For Peter Damian the cell is the fiery kiln in which precious vessels for the King are made. It is a shop in which 'happy bargains' (*felix commercium*) are made — earth is traded for heaven. It is the workshop in which the lost likeness of the Creator is reformed in man's soul. The cell itself, says Damian, grants the gift of fasting and of contemplation. 'Thou grantest that man may see God with a pure heart, whereas before, wrapped in his own darkness, he did not even know himself.' Thus the cell is the place where man comes to know himself first of all that he may know God (Augustine's program — *Noverim me, noverim Te*). The cell is the sole witness of the divine love flaming in the heart of the monk as he seeks the face of God, says Peter Damian. It is like the Holy Sepulcher which alone witnessed the resurrection of the Savior in the night of Easter: the cell is the place of the monk's resurrection to the divine life and light for which he was created and, according to the Irish hermit tradition, the cell will be the place of the hermit's resurrection at the last day. 'Whosoever perseveres in his love of thee (O solitary cell) dwells indeed in thee, but God dwells in him.'

This is the classic language of contemplative experience. It takes us back to the first saying we quoted, at the beginning of this meditation. To 'sit in the cell for the Name of God': this means something at once more concrete and more profound than simply remaining in solitude with the *intention of pleasing* God, or with the holiness of God as a '*sufficient reason*' for one's solitude. At least, we must understand the concept of 'sufficient reason' here in great depth. The Name of God is indeed the *ratio* of solitude not only in the sense that 'service of God' can be

invoked as a plausible explanation for the solitary vocation, but in the sense that in solitude one comes face to face with God Himself, present, as the Bible everywhere suggests, 'in His Name'. The Name of God is the presence of God. The Name of God in the cell is God Himself *as present to the monk* and understood by the monk and understood by the monk as the whole meaning and goal of his vocation. Hence the Name of God is present in the solitude of the cell as the 'Son of God' (angel) was present with the children in the fiery furnace and as the pillar of cloud was present to Moses. Two typical Biblical images here represent *all* the possible Biblical symbols for the inscrutable presence of Yahweh. The Name of God is present in the cell as in the burning bush, in which Yahweh reveals Himself as *He who is*. Hence the solitude of the hermit is *engulfed*, so to speak, in the awareness of QUI EST. This in fact becomes the true reality of the cell and of solitude, so that the monk who begins by invoking the Name of God to induce Him as it were to 'come down' to the cell in answer to prayer, gradually comes to realize that the 'Name' of God is in fact the heart of the cell, the soul of the solitary life, and that one has been called into solitude not just in order that the Name may be invoked in a certain place, but rather one has been called to meet the Name which is present and waiting in one's own place. It is as though the Name were waiting in the desert for me, and had been preparing this meeting from eternity and in this particular place, this solitude chosen for me. I am called not just to meditate on the Name of God but to encounter Him in that Name. Thus the Name becomes, as it were, a cell within a cell, an inner spiritual cell. When I am in the cell or its immediate environs, I should recognize that I am 'where the Name of God dwells' and that living in the presence of this great Name I gradually become the one He wills me to be. Thus the life of the cell makes me at once a cell of the Name (which takes deeper and deeper root in my heart) and a dweller in the Name, as if the Name of God — God Himself — were my cell. But since God is infinite, He cannot become a 'cell' except in so far as He seems to take on certain limits, in a Name which defines and distinguishes Him: as if He were present in His Name and absent elsewhere. (Yet at the same time He is in all, through all things. But it is from the vantage point of the particular solitude in which I meet and discover His Name for myself that I can understand His presence everywhere else. Thus the reason for stability in solitude is that the hermit goes wandering out of solitude in the world, the 'presence' of God may remain as an abstraction which he *knows* but which he no longer experiences in all the concreteness that is demanded and that is possible when the Name is present in the cell. True of course the Name goes with me wherever I invoke him, and dwells in my heart everywhere, but this is thanks to the cell. Here we see the Name implies not only identity but WILL and LOVE. The name that overshadows the monk in the cloud of solitude is the creative and redemptive will of our Father, and this Name impregnates everything with a redemptive and loving significance, with promises of love and salvation, with invitations to compassion and intercession for all men. Thus

through the Name of God the solitary comes to the knowledge of him who makes Himself present in solitude.

Above all, of course, He reveals his Name as that of JESUS, Savior, in whom and with whom I am one with all men. Thus my place as intercessor and brother is also my solitude and my cell where I find and love all men in the warm and human love of the presence of Christ, for it is the Word *Incarinate* (signified by the pillar of cloud and by the angel present in the furnace) who alone can give me full comfort in trials that are essentially human and bound up with my physical being. There is no peace and no reality in an abstract, disincarnate, gnostic solitude. St. Peter Damian insists that since the Christian hermit is hidden in Jesus Christ he is therefore most intimately present (*praesentissimus*) to all the rest of the Church. His isolation in solitude unites him more closely in love with all the rest of his brothers in the world. Hence there is every good reason for the hermit to say *Dominus vobiscum* in his office and Mass even though no one may be physically present. We can see here the implications of having the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the hermit's cell.

The mercy, the compassion, the human-hearted wise and ever faithful love of God (all these are Names in the Name) are represented in a new and surprising, but very tender form in one of the apothegms.⁶ A brother asks one of the old men what he should do if in affliction and loneliness he should be left helpless with no one to whom he might explain his trouble. The answer is that God will send help 'if you pray in truth' and this is illustrated by a story. At Scete a hermit was suffering in absolute isolation with no one to console or help him in any way. He got his things together in order to leave the desert. 'Then divine grace appeared to him in the form of a virgin who encouraged him and said: Do not go away BUT STAY HERE WITH ME, for none of the evils you have imagined has ever happened to you. HE OBEYED AND STAYED THERE, and at this moment his heart was healed.'

Here is a deep and moving insight into the reality of that Name which is also full of tenderness and which is revealed as Wisdom, Sophia, and in whose mysterious and beautiful form God is pleased to make Himself present to the sons of men (Prov. 8:31).

The Book of Wisdom speaks of this mysterious and intimate love of man for divine wisdom as his bride and friend whom he has preferred to everything else. 'For all the gold in the world, compared with her, is but a little sand and next to her all silver counts as mud' (Wis. 7:9). 'But with her friendship one becomes truly the friend of God' (Wis. 7:14). 'She makes them friends of God and prophets, for God loves only those who dwell with wisdom' (Wis. 7:27-28).

This then is the true secret of the cell, a paradise in which he who is called meets, in silence, awareness and peace the consoling and healing presence of that wisdom whose beauty is 'a reflection of the eternal light and a spotless mirror of the doings of God, the image of His excellence' (Wis. 7:26).

*For she is fairer than the sun
 and surpasses every constellation of the stars.
 Compared to light, she takes precedence;
 for that, indeed, night supplants,
 but wickedness prevails not over Wisdom.
 Indeed, she reaches from end to end mightily
 and governs all things well.
 Her I loved and sought after from my youth;
 I sought to take her for my bride
 and was enamored of her beauty.*

(Wis. 7:29 - 8:2)

Notes

1. An apothegm published by Nau, 'Histoire des Solitaires Egyptiens', *Revue Orient Chrétien*, 13 (1908), p. 278.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 277, n. 196.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 279, n. 206.
5. Opusc, xi. c. 19.
6. Nau, *op. cit.*, p. 283, n. 215.

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