

Solitude and Silence

Solitude and Silence

The Cloister of the Heart

THOMAS À KEMPIS

Translated by
FR. ROBERT NIXON, OSB

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“Silence can carve out an inner space in our very depths to enable God to dwell there, so that his word will remain within us and love for him take root in our minds and hearts and inspire our life. Hence the first direction: relearning silence, openness to listening, which opens us to the other, to the word of God.”

—Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience*,
March 7, 2012

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The following book is the first English translation of a work entitled *De Solitudine et Silentio* (On Solitude and Silence) by Thomas à Kempis, the author of the timeless masterpiece *The Imitation of Christ*. Thomas also wrote *Humility and the Elevation of the Mind to God* and *Meditations on Death*, which have been published by TAN Books. Thomas à Kempis (1380–1470) began his religious life as a member of the Brotherhood of the Common Life (a kind of religious community, chiefly of scholars and students, who lived a quasi-monastic life but without vows). Following this, he entered the Order of Canons Regular and was eventually ordained a priest. Although he did not rise to great heights in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, he was widely revered as an inspiring and astute spiritual mentor. He was also a prolific and widely-read author, with his complete works running to many volumes.

This small work presents a compilation of advice and observations on the cultivation of solitude and silence. While some of Thomas's comments relate specifically to persons

in monastic or religious life, the vast majority applies to the spiritual life of all Catholics. With his customary eloquence, Thomas describes the wonderful spiritual benefits and graces which solitude and silence can confer. He also identifies potential obstacles, frustrations, and perils encountered by those who seek to cultivate these virtues, and he proposes practical and effective strategies for overcoming these.

The value of solitude and silence is affirmed by virtually all religious and philosophical traditions in the world, from the ancient ascetics of the East to the Stoics of the classical Greek and Roman world to the earliest Christian desert hermits. Within the Catholic Church, solitude and silence are central to the charism of the monastic orders (including the Benedictines, Cistercians, and Carthusians) but also an indispensable element for all those in other forms of consecrated life.

Thomas à Kempis is not, of course, advocating the adoption of a strictly eremitical life for each and every one of his readers. Rather, he recommends the systematic and intentional incorporation of solitude and silence in a manner which is consistent with each one's vocation and state of life. Aside from silence itself, he also praises restraint and moderation in speech as an admirable and neglected virtue, pointing out the multitude of sins (detraction, gossip,

vainglory, profanity, etc.) which all too easily accompany imprudent or excessive talkativeness.

Undoubtedly, the cultivation of silence and solitude is an immensely valuable source of spiritual strength and nourishment for all Catholics, regardless of their particular vocation and role in the world. For it is in solitude and silence that the soul is best positioned to encounter God, freed from the multitudinous distractions of social interactions, activity, noise, images, and ideas (and, increasingly, electronic media). In the words of Robert Cardinal Sarah, “Through silence, we return to our heavenly origin, where there is nothing but calm, peace, repose, silent contemplation, and adoration of the radiant face of God.”¹

The cultivation of solitude and silence is indeed a necessary prerequisite for entrance into the wonderful experience of divine contemplation, which is the ultimate goal of all Christian prayer. This divine contemplation, the mystical “seeing God as he really is,”² must be considered to be a universal human vocation and not separable from the universal vocation to sanctity. For, in essence, the bliss of heaven is nothing other than this pure and eternal perception of the Divinity. This vision of God may also be experienced (to varying degrees) even in this world through the

¹ Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 54.

² 1 John 3:2.

grace of contemplative prayer. And solitude and silence are the hallowed doors through which one must pass to arrive at this delightful and serene state of holy contemplation.

May Jesus and the Immaculate Virgin guide us safely through these portals, both by their example and by their never-failing and most merciful assistance.

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SOLITUDE

IN PRAISE OF SOLITUDE

My dear friend in Christ, it is my earnest wish to provide you with a kind of small booklet to which you may turn whenever you have a few moments free from the external tasks and labors in which you are engaged. Rejoice and delight in such moments, for in them you may turn most fully to the Lord, in whom alone your true happiness and serenity is to be found!

I shall now humbly undertake to share with you some insights into the spiritual pleasures and benefits of solitude and silence, for these are ever the true friends and allies of the soul who seeks the peace and freedom which only Christ can give.

MINDFULNESS OF THE GOODNESS OF GOD

In your moments of solitude and leisure when you may relax quietly and without distractions, you should always take the opportunity to reflect on the infinite goodness of

God. Consider particularly the vastness of the benefits that the Lord has so generously bestowed upon you.

Whatever you experience in this life, whether it seems to be good or bad, easy or difficult, delightful or painful, may (and should) work for your spiritual progress. If you are attentive, you will experience and discover something new each and every day, and you may learn some new lesson thereby, gaining a fresh insight into the nature of God, your fellow human beings, and your own self. Every opportunity to enter into solitude is unique and different in some way from all other such occasions. In each of these moments, you have a privileged and wonderful opportunity to enter further into the infinite and inexhaustible mystery of the Divinity and to come to understand your own nature—including your strengths and weaknesses—more fully.

TRUE HUMILITY BEFORE THE WILL OF GOD

The circumstances and conditions of this earthly life are incessantly changing and fluctuating. Truly has it been said that nothing here remains the same. And these changes come about either through our own selves or through others or through nature itself. Yet amidst all this change and variation, this fluctuation and fluidity, we should constantly recognize the will of God unfolding itself according to

some mysterious and unseen divine plan. And we should humbly pray to the Lord that whatever He wishes should come about, saying to Him sincerely, “Thy will be done,” and trusting absolutely that it will ultimately assist in our own salvation and lead us to final peace and happiness.

Just as clay is molded and fashioned in the hands of the sculptor, so are we all being formed and shaped by the hands of God. The fact that God even deigns to work on us and to fashion us is itself a stupendous mark of honor and love, even when the process of being molded may be difficult to understand or unpleasant to accept. And whether God chooses to form us into some large and much-admired work of art or He makes of us something small and humble, we should not be particularly concerned or worried. For even if we seem to be the least amongst our brothers and sisters, we are still equally the work of God’s loving hands. We are no less esteemed by the only One whose esteem truly matters!

And we should trust and have confidence that God holds us all in special dignity and particular and unique value before Himself. For He is a loving Father to each of us, whatever we happen to be or possess, through nature or through grace. We should, therefore, not concern ourselves greatly over differences in external merits or talents, or the apparent importance of the particular roles which we (or others) are called to perform. Indeed, we should neither feel

discouraged nor dejected, nor elated and self-important. Nor should we never look down upon others who seem to be less important or virtuous than ourselves, nor should we envy others who seem greater and more gifted than we are.

Whatever the role or station in life you happen to find yourself, you may still engage fully in the most important and highest work which any human being may possibly do—which is contemplating God in love and serving Him in prayer, devotion, and charity. Whoever you are and whatever is your situation in life, we can all find some moments of solitude in which to devote ourselves to this exalted and noble calling of divine contemplation. This is the highest work of even the seraphim themselves! It is a holy vocation which is universal, and yet also most profoundly personal for each of us.

IN MOMENTS OF PEACE AND
TRANQUILITY, IT IS USEFUL TO REMEMBER
TIMES OF STRESS AND STRUGGLE

Whenever you are enjoying some time of peace and rest, it is useful to call to mind those times when you have been busy, overworked, or stressed. Whenever you are enjoying the calmness of solitude and silence, it is useful to reflect on those occasions when you have been assaulted with noise and activity. Indeed, calling such things to mind is a sure

and effective way of learning to love and value the peaceful tranquility of your times of solitude!

If you reflect upon how easily you can become anxious or worried, or how little it takes to perturb your soul, you will also realize that the achievement of true inner peace is not something which human efforts can ever achieve on their own. Left to yourself, how often you have fallen prey to anxiety, even when there is little or no real need to worry! How often, even when you are surrounded by exterior silence, your mind is still filled with the clamor of unruly and agitated thoughts and disturbed by your own worries!

Since this is an undeniable characteristic of our fragile human nature, to experience both exterior solitude and interior peace can only be a gift from God. And God generously gives such moments to all, as long as they do not resist Him or refuse His gift. It is at such times that you should turn yourself to divine contemplation. And to the soul which enters into such contemplation, all earthly worries, desires, and distractions will soon seem to be as nothing!

But the person who refuses to give himself over to solitude and occasional inactivity but compels himself instead to be constantly busy or constantly interacting with others, refuses and resists this great gift of God. And it is, alas, a very rare thing for such a compulsively busy person to come to know the delights of contemplation.

LOVE OF SOLITUDE

“Flee, my beloved!”¹ says the soul to its spouse. For Jesus, who is the true beloved spouse of the soul, is often read to have fled from the crowds and taken Himself off into the desert places to seek solitude.

You will surely be with Jesus if you, too, flee from the crowds and seek out the “desert places.” And when you find such a place in your soul, let it be as a secret garden of delight to you. Guard and protect it most carefully!

Saint Jerome compares the place in which one finds solitude and refuge from the crowd to a Garden of Eden, for he writes, “As long as you are away from your heavenly homeland, let your place of solitary refuge be as a Paradise to you.” In this spiritual Garden of Eden of solitude, you will indeed rejoice in the Lord. You will converse with God, and He shall speak to you. And His glorious light and truth shall be manifested and revealed to your heart with ever increasing radiance and clarity.

Just as when the sun first rises at dawn, its visible rays are soon multiplied more and more, even so, when Christ comes to you, the interior dwelling place of your heart shall become more and more illuminated. You will be purified by a new light, and in its glorious splendor, your interior being shall joyfully exult.

¹ Song of Songs 8:14.

And then you shall surely exclaim, “O Lord, to whom may I compare you?”² And you will experience firsthand the truth of that eloquent verse of Scripture in which it is written, “In your light, we see light.”³ And again, “The Lord is my light and my salvation.”⁴ And, “In your light, O Lord, I will walk, and I will exult in your name, for you are the glory of my virtue, and my delight!”⁵

THE SPECIAL PRIVILEGE OF SOLITUDE

Consider, my friend, the special privilege which you have received by virtue of your situation and status in life, and exercise care to live in such a manner that you take full advantage of this privileged vocation.⁶ For not all people are gifted with the opportunities to spend time in contemplation, as you are. As for yourself, you are blessed with a suitable place for prayer and chances to spend time in solitude which exceed those of most other people.

May the Spirit of Jesus be with you, for it is His Spirit alone which teaches and illuminates “all those entering the world.”⁷ When His Spirit is present, you shall surely

² Psalms 89:2.

³ Psalms 36:9.

⁴ Psalms 27:1.

⁵ See Psalms 89:15–17.

⁶ Thomas was writing this particular counsel for people in consecrated religious life of one form or another. Nevertheless, his comments here will still be found relevant for many Christians in other states of life.

⁷ John 1:9.

neither need nor desire the presence of other human beings to console you or entertain you.

But when you feel that His Spirit is absent from you, then be content to wait patiently. For He shall indeed come when He judges the moment to be opportune and will not delay.

DISDAIN FOR EXTERNAL CONSOLATIONS

It is wise advice to beware always that you do not fall into the habit of seeking consolation and diversions in the exterior things of this world. Rather, strive to find your consolation in interior silence. And when this consolation cannot be found, then call upon God with tears of sincere compunction and repentance, and He shall surely not fail to hear you and answer you in the way that is best.

It is useful, however, to speak to a human spiritual guide at times. You should honestly confess to such a guide any occasions or habits of negligence you currently have, and reveal any anxieties which you are experiencing. At certain times, such conversations are useful and helpful. For not all people receive the grace to be able to echo the words of the apostle Saint Paul, when he said, “I have been instructed by no human being, but through the revelation of Jesus Christ himself.”⁸

But to the one who finds himself to be free of the need for human guidance and companionship—he may count

⁸ Galatians 1:12.

himself as being specially blessed and should thank God sincerely for the particular strength and grace he has received from Him.

THE VALUE OF HUMAN SPIRITUAL SUPPORT FOR THOSE WHO ARE STRUGGLING

But it must be acknowledged that there are many who struggle greatly with solitude and rely upon a human spiritual director to guide and accompany them. For such people, they should attentively listen to the words of their spiritual director as if they were not merely human words but the words of God communicated to them by means of a human agency.

God speaks to each of us in a way that is adapted to our needs and our state of development. Indeed, whenever necessary, He is willing even to speak to us as if we are little children, sometimes through other human beings and sometimes through the words of Sacred Scripture. We may be confident that whatever consolation, encouragement, correction, and guidance we most truly need, the Lord will never fail to provide it for us. But it behooves us to trust God's judgment in this matter and not give more weight to our own opinions and preferences.