

# **“Alone” need not mean “lonely”:**

## **Solitude and Loneliness in Celibate Life**

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Father Richard is a priest I lived with and knew well. A talented musician, a good public speaker and a gracious host, he had many friends and acquaintances. As he grew older, he experienced times of acute loneliness. Talking this over with a good friend of his, a layman he had known for years, he confided, “I did not know that I would have to face such intense loneliness at this age.” During their heart-to-heart chat, his friend told Fr. Richard, “Mrs. So-and-so lost her husband the other day. She is the same age as you. She is really all alone in this world. God had not told her, too, what it would mean to age and to have to face loneliness. Isn’t aloneness something we all have to learn to face?”

Father Richard told me that this conversation with his married friend helped him. (The conversation is not as uncaring as it may sound here; I am giving only the bare bones of their chat.) It helped him see the basic truth that solitude and moments of loneliness are things every human being has to face, whether we are married or celibate. Each of us has to face the truth that, humanly speaking, we are ultimately alone. No one can live our life for us, face our feelings for us, be there for us always. We need to develop the inner strength to face our basic solitude and to go through times of loneliness—or else we drown.

### **Solitude and Loneliness**

What is solitude? What is loneliness? How do we learn to cope with solitude and loneliness? How do we grow through them, and not just survive?

Solitude is the fact of being alone. It can be a tough or sad burden to carry, or a wonderfully creative and happy experience, depending on what is happening within us. Some of the ancient monasteries had this saying, either in their books or on the wall: *O beata solitudo! O sola beatitudo!* (“Oh, happy solitude! Our only happiness!”) A human being, particularly an adult, can find solitude either deeply troubling or deeply fulfilling, depending on what goes on within each one. Without solitude there is no serious reflection or creative work or personal growth. If we need to be always with people, or surrounded by noise and talk and laughter, this hunger reveals an inner emptiness. (To write this article, for instance, I need to be alone. I need time for myself, to think, to read, to organize my thoughts, to write with concentration. This is true of any serious work.) In fact, one of the problems many people face today is the lack of solitude—the stressful fact of being always surrounded by people, whether it be at home or at work or while travelling. You are lucky if you are blessed with enough space and time to be alone, undisturbed, during which you can think or read or pray or write or engage in other creative activities.

Those who have a rich inner life generally enjoy their time alone. While they enjoy people and often turn out to be delightful friends and conversation partners, they do not need to be with others to feel happy or to have a full life. Their own inner life is rich enough to keep them engaged. Or they find much to observe and learn from, in the ordinary settings and events of life. Nature, for instance, can be a wonderful companion that speaks to our heart. A walk in the woods or on the beach can nourish our spirit and heal us. Deep silence can be a rich and immensely satisfying experience.

Loneliness is a very different matter altogether. It is the feeling of being unconnected or unloved or unloving. You can feel lonely in the midst of a crowd, if you have no significant

relationships. You can be famous and lonely. You can appear successful and feel desperately lonely. I remember reading about a world class tennis player who would—after brilliant international games which he won—walk around like a mad man, deeply depressed. His dazzling performance in sports did not fill his heart; he was a very lonely man.

A friend confided in me once: “It happens to me, and not very rarely, that I am in the middle of a crowd, and there is food and noise and laughter, and I feel very lonely.” This is neither strange nor rare. You can be alone, and feel loved and connected and engaged in meaningful work or prayer—and feel deeply happy. You can also be surrounded by people and so-called fun, and feel utterly miserable, feeling unconnected to anyone in a meaningful way. Being alone and feeling lonely are two very different experiences. In fact, some people find deep meaning and fulfillment in the midst of physical pain and isolation from loved ones—provided they see their suffering as meaningful. Think, for instance, of Saint Thomas More, who had reached the pinnacle of worldly success—he was rich, brilliant, popular, Chancellor of England and a friend of the king—when the tide turned against him. He did not agree with King Henry VIII on a matter of conscience. For this, he was imprisoned, deprived of his political posts and property, and, after his time in jail, during which he refused to change his stand, beheaded. From jail he wrote a letter to his daughter Margaret, whom he loved dearly. (It is in the breviary on his feast day.) In that letter, he tells her something that would not make any sense in worldly or human terms. “Dearest Meg,” he tells his beloved daughter, “Of all the graces the good Lord has showered on me—and they have been many—this imprisonment is the greatest.”

So, being alone need not mean the same thing as being lonely or lost or sad. That depends on what goes on within us.

## **Creative Solitude**

In fact, some of the most joyful people who are a delight to be with, are persons who enjoy being by themselves to think, read, pray or write. Their words are worth listening to, because they are born of deep experiences and clear-headed reflection. They are not simply filling the air with words. If our preaching and our pastoral ministry is to be effective, and meeting us has to be happy and grace-filled for people, we priests must be men capable of deep silence who know the human heart by getting seriously in touch with our own depths. Thus, the much-loved Pope John XXIII and the magnetic John Paul II (who connected so well with huge crowds and with youngsters) were deeply prayerful, contemplative spirits, who spent time alone in prayer and reflection. Without deep and nourishing periods of solitude, we will be superficial; our spirits will wither; our company will turn out to be boring and meaningless for people.

Rachel, a married Catholic woman who has inspired me a great deal, faced tremendous hardships—being married to an abusive alcoholic who did no work, being penniless and alone in bringing up eight children, persistent ill health, repeated miscarriages, misunderstandings. She found extraordinary strength in her life of prayer. One day, seeing her spend a long time in church, a well-meaning stranger asked her, “Are you alone?” “No,” Rachel replied, without any hesitation, “God is with me.” She suffered much, but brought up her children well—characterwise and in terms of worldly success. Her source of strength was her relationship with God. When she died, the pastor of the neighbouring Protestant church preached about her, saying, “Neither in the Catholic parish nor in our church was there a person as good as this lady.” Such is the power of an inner journey with God. One can be, humanly speaking, alone, or face frightening odds, but find unusual courage and strength in a journey of faith.

You may have heard the saying, “Eagles fly alone; ducks in flocks.” If all I want to do in life is to float and say “Quack, quack,” I will have lots of company. That is, if my interests

are limited to food and amusements and cricket scores and fashion (or, worse, gossip), I will find many people who have similar interests. What we will actually be doing is to pull each other down to new levels of immaturity. If, instead, I want to perform at the peak of my abilities, if I want to do something beautiful and lasting with my life, I need to reflect, choose wisely, pray over my decisions, seek counselling and spiritual direction. I need to be ready to “fly alone.” Olympic champions are not created by the hundreds, or even by the dozen. Each one is a unique, and extremely hard-working, individual.

So, decide! Do you want to merely float and be mediocre, or do you want to do the best you are capable of? If you want to excel—by this, I do not mean cheap goals like getting special posts or making a show of our work or climbing over others, but doing the best with the gifts God has given you—you need to take responsibility for yourself, and demand much from yourself. This will imply facing your aloneness. You will need—and get—help from a few genuine persons, but do not expect the approval of many, nor to be understood by everyone.

There is the loneliness of the crook and the manipulator who ends up lonely and bitter because, as others discover his crookedness and power games, they move away and avoid the shrewd operator who thought he could bluff the rest. This is very different from the aloneness of the saint, the idealist, the creative genius. Several doctrines of Thomas Aquinas were condemned by the Bishop of Paris two years after his death. Later, Aquinas would be venerated as the most respected theologian in church history. Don Bosco suffered painful misunderstandings and ill-treatment at the hands of his archbishop; some priests even thought him crazy. He is a venerated household name today. Jesuit scientist Teilhard de Chardin was not allowed to teach or publish his writings. In his last days in New York, he was struggling to find even one Jesuit in his community who really understood him. After his death, he became a glory for the Jesuits and for the church. This is true in such fields as art, literature, politics, science. The courage of the lonely seeker is what led to new medicines and books and art work and social changes. Thus, Mahatmas Gandhi, the truest architect of India’s independence, was not present at the Independence Day celebrations on August 15, 1947, in Delhi. He was in the villages of Bengal, bringing peace to villages torn apart by the waves of Hindu-Moslem hatred. In doing this, he was very much alone.

Here is an instructive episode from the life of the great pioneer in psychology, Carl Jung. A clergyman told Jung that he felt overburdened with work, harassed and restless. Jung suggested to him to cancel all his appointments for a week and spend time with himself, after which they could meet and talk about what he found. After a few days, the pastor phoned to tell Jung that he was going to take the following week off, as Jung had suggested. “And,” he added, “I have bought books and tapes for the week.” Jung replied, “I did not ask you to read books and listen to tapes, but to spend time with yourself.” “Spend time with myself?” the clergyman retorted, astonished, “I cannot think of a more boring company.” To this, Carl Jung’s reply was: “But you inflict it on others twelve hours a day.”

If we want to relate with people in productive and pastorally nourishing ways, we need to nourish our spirit through silence, reflection and prayer. Adding journal-writing to our prayer and reflection would be an extra help.

How do we judge whether the solitary seeker is a genuine reformer and creative genius, or a mere crackpot claiming to see what others fail to see? The answer is life. Real life and relationships show us who is credible and who is not. Thus, when experts examined the writings of Teresa of Avila and the ramblings of a mentally ill (psychotic) woman, they found similarities between their styles and fantasies. What made Teresa a mystic and the other woman a mental case was the way each of them lived. Teresa, unlike the mentally unbalanced recluse, was a positive, active woman who reached out to others with love and forgiveness, was noted

for her common sense, charm and wit, and who found the inner resources to keep her peace in spite of ill-health and much opposition. It is not enough that a person believes oneself to be creative, or to be gifted with a higher vision or a more relevant plan of action. Life and loving relationships will show who is genuine and healthy, and who is merely out of touch with reality.

There is another important aspect that we celibates must keep in mind. *Celibacy, if it is to be meaningful and happy, demands both closeness and distance.* We need to relate to people warmly and personally, and be approachable, lovable human beings. We also need to know our boundaries, and not expect from others what they cannot give us.

The “closest closeness” for celibates lies in cultivating intimacy with God in prayer. Without that, a happy celibate life is simply impossible. So, too, we need to build happy communities and learn to relate to people positively at three levels—intimacy, friendship and kindness. A word on these three levels may not be out of place. If we share in depth with one or two or a few, with whom we can be fully ourselves without fear, this is *intimacy*. We need to cultivate *friendships*, that is, have people whom we love and whose affection we can count on; this may be with a few or with more persons, depending on our temperaments and interests. Thirdly, we have to train ourselves to treat people in general with *courtesy and kindness*, avoiding rude or uncouth behaviour that puts off people. *The simplest and most evident expression of celibacy well-lived is to be a happy and loving human being, with a rich inner life nourished by meaningful personal prayer and genuine relationships with people.*

Talking of intimacy, the case of a young priest—let us call him Andrew—comes to my mind. He was (and is) a fine human being—sincere, loving, responsible and nice to deal with. He is also a man of prayer. He left the priesthood a couple of years after ordination for a reason he shared with a number of us. He enjoyed many aspects of the priesthood, he said: celebrating Mass, preaching, relating to people, dealing with other priests. It would have been easy for him to carry on, he said. Andrew was not leaving because he was desperately unhappy or because others made his life difficult. His reason for deciding to leave was this: “I want to share my life in depth with another human being. Our usual chit-chat in the dining room is not enough for me.” Fair enough; I only wish he had sorted this out before his ordination. That, I thought, would have been better for him, for his family and for his brother priests and parishioners.

So, if a seminarian or young religious finds that what his heart longs for is a deep one-to-one sharing on a daily basis with an exclusive life-partner, he needs to look at this issue seriously and sincerely. His call may be marriage, not celibacy. It is better to live the vocation of marriage and parenthood responsibly and lovingly than put up with celibacy for which one does not have a heartfelt inclination. Only if we are happy in our basic choice will we work cheerfully for others. Unwilling celibates will be reluctant servants of God and grumpy bosses of the people. They will be neither witnesses to God’s love, nor inspiring examples for people to follow.

As far as we, priests and religious, are concerned, our prayer life and genuineness in dealing with others show us a way out of loneliness and helps us create a life of productive solitude and warm relationships. If we are true to our calling, people will say about us what people say about good priests or religious they know: “That Father is genuine. He lives what he says. He is caring; I can go to him whenever I am in trouble. He is not a gossip or slander-monger; I can trust him. His love for people, especially the poor and the suffering, is evident; he is really a father to them. He really wants the good of the people, and works hard for us; he is not after power or money. We are blessed to have this man in our midst.” Such a priest or religious, precisely in not running after what the world can offer, has something worthwhile to offer to the world. They are too busy caring for others to feel lonely; their heart is so full of

compassion and love that they find little time to think of themselves. Just as they are marked by the evident joy that is the fruit of faith and sincere service, they are blessed by the love of many. Criticism and unfair accusations they will get; but they experience more love and support than most human beings will ever receive.

To bring the general truths we have been discussing down to the level of daily practice, I would like to make the following ten recommendations. See whether your experience confirms their value. If not, try other avenues that you have found more life-giving.

### **Ten Tips on Solitude and Loneliness**

1. *Listen to your heart.* We can learn much about our real needs—as opposed to imaginary or artificially created wants—if we are in touch with ourselves in depth. What is my sense of feeling alone telling me, or asking me? Is it a need, or merely an attraction or want? We do not need to be always in company, or be watching TV, or have distractions to fill our mind. Our own mind and inner experiences are a rich source of stimulation and enjoyment. As the saying goes, “what lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us.” Meditation, for instance, can be spiritually nourishing, emotionally healing and even good for one’s physical health. Studies prove the positive emotional and physical effects of regular meditation and prayer. A rich inner life is far more nourishing than most chit-chat or light reading or watching TV.
2. *Cultivate your relationship with God:* Lorraine, a middle-aged woman who laughed a lot, related well to other parishioners and asked me for jokes, did not have an easy life. Witnessing her cheerfulness and positive outlook, I did not even guess that she was a cancer patient in the last stage of her life. I found out the secret of her joy when we visited her home. Laughing as usual, Lorraine showed us a large soft toy of two rabbits—a tiny rabbit tenderly held in the arms of a larger rabbit. “That is how I feel in the arms of God,” said the happy Lorraine. It is this experience that helped her face cancer and her approaching death with calm and strength. As priests, we will meet many people of deep faith, facing far tougher situations than the ones we have to handle. We have much to learn from them. One of the most precious lessons we can learn is how to walk with God, and not feel alone.
3. *Cultivate a few deep and genuine friendships:* On life’s journey, we will meet all types of people—the saintly and the crooked, the innocent and the malicious, the gossips and the genuine. We will be deeply edified by some and badly put off by others. Such characters are found, not only among people in general, but, sadly, among the priests we know as well. In any walk of life, we cannot expect most people to love us genuinely. Most will approach us when they need our help or services. This is how life is. What we need to do is this: Have one or two or a few friends who are genuine, whom we can trust, whose support we can count on in need, and who will criticize us to our face, but never stab us in the back. Such friends are life’s greatest treasures. Do not trust people who cheat or gossip or have no convictions. They will turn against you when they find it advantageous. So, too, remember: Genuine relationships cannot be built in one day; you cannot create fast friends, like fast food or instant noodles! Do you have deep and genuine friends, with whom you can be yourself, whose help you can count on, and who will confront you frankly when they think you are doing something wrong?
4. *Structure your time:* Have a plan (a schedule) for your day, week, month, year. Have a time-table, and follow it as far as you can. Many people have no idea where their time is going. When we come to the end of the day, and find that we filled it with meaningful

activities, we have a sense of satisfaction. This sense of contentment about time well spent boosts our spirits more than the appreciation of others.

5. *Use time positively:* Don't fill up your hours with too much TV or meaningless chit-chat, or, worse still, with gossip or grumbling. Time and health are the most priceless gifts we possess. Whether we are happy or lonely, depends a lot how we structure and use our time. Those who have worthwhile things to do—visit the sick, counsel the lonely, prepare homilies, meet with the youth, pray, ...--are seldom lonely. Their usual feeling is that twenty-four hours are not enough to do all the things they want to do each day.
6. *Read, write:* Good reading is tremendously enriching. Sadly, the reading habit is very poor among us, priests and religious. One reason for this is that we are in a non-competitive profession, where we do not lose anything (money, promotions or sales, as in the business or professional world) by not preparing our talks well or seeking excellence in our jobs. In reading a good book, we are really listening to (and talking with) a qualified, inspiring or well-informed person. Through this contact, our own life becomes much richer, and our company more interesting for others. If we do not keep learning, our life will become a dull, boring routine, and our talks and company will become the object of others' ridicule.
7. *Take reasonable care of your body:* Our moods depend much on our level of physical fitness. In our celibate life, there is no partner sharing our life, and checking on our health. We need to take responsibility for keeping fit and healthy. This means: eating healthy food (and not overeating), avoiding addictions (like alcoholism), doing enough exercise (e.g., yoga, walking, playing with our students), getting a check-up as we grow older, etc. Lonely feelings and low moods are at times the result of being physically unfit.
8. *Relate to nature:* Nature is healing and very nourishing for our spirit. Trees, plants, flowers, the sunrise and sunset, mountains and water, the sea and the stars...are all good for our moods and our mental and physical health. Recently, a sister who has conducted ashram experiences for different groups told me that poor street children proved to be excellent at contemplation. They learnt to talk to trees and to listen to trees and plants. When a German engineer turned Buddhist monk spoke to us at Madras University—he had a great smile and a striking name, “Stardust”—one of the students asked him how he learnt so many things. Stardust replied: “The trees speak to me. That is how I learn.”
9. *Don't allow yourself to sink into depression:* All of us will experience low moods and feelings of loneliness. That is the time to ask ourselves what is really happening, and what we are missing. We should not let a minor low mood develop into a depression, or escape looking at reality by drinking or oversleeping. One simple remedy for minor low moods or feelings of loneliness is to reach out to others. Doing something loving for someone else is one of the healthiest ways of handling our sense of being unconnected.
10. *Don't run away from feelings of aloneness and loneliness:* Once when an Indian priest found himself alone in the big rectory of an American parish, he was “tempted,” he said, to phone up friends to break the solitude. Instead, on second thoughts, he decided to see how could face his aloneness and make himself happy. This, he said, proved to be a constructive exercise. We can learn from any experience, if we want to. We do not have to be surrounded by people the whole time, or to have noise and gadgets and external stimulation to have a full life. Check: What is really happening? What is my heart saying? What am I really missing? Such self-examination will provide you with very useful and occasionally surprising insights into yourself. When you feel lonely or a

in a low mood next time, don't automatically reach for the mobile or the TV remote (or, worse still, the bottle). Find out what is really happening inside you.

## **A Home Within Us**

Celibacy presents particular challenges and unique opportunities in the area of solitude and relationships. Unlike marriage and parenthood, our commitment to people and our dedication to serve them are not based on attachment, but on a faith-inspired vision. If this faith vision becomes deeply mine, and I am gripped by the mission, I will find celibate life beautiful, meaningful and challenging. If not, it will sink to the level of a comfort-seeking or power-hungry bachelorhood. Such a life will not fill my heart. One great danger in celibacy—perhaps the commonest pitfall—is to lead an unloving life and take it as normal. That is, I may not love anyone, nor care deeply for people's spiritual, intellectual or material needs, and lead a life centred on my security and conveniences. Such a love is not criminal, but it is unloving and uninspiring. Celibacy makes sense if I am gripped by Jesus' life and example, and find my joy in living a simple and loving life in line with that. Then, it is a happy and inspiring life. Within it, we can give and receive much love.

Another conviction that has helped me and others is this: Let us suppose there are one hundred people we know or people who know us. Of these one hundred, four or five will be so very nice and loving towards us that we will feel like exclaiming, "They are so good to me. I don't deserve it. I feel so blessed to have them in my life." True. There are such people, deeply loving and exceptionally caring. Their presence is a gift.

Another four or five will misunderstand or misconstrue our motives, criticize us unfairly and give us a hard time. This, too, is a part of life.

For the remaining eighty-five to ninety per cent, believe me, it does not matter whether we are alive or dead. They will approach us if they need something, and if we can help them. They are busy with their life. They are neither for us, nor against us. (For instance, you are reading this article, neither out of love for me, nor to put me down, but to find something useful for yourself, right? This is fine by me. This does not mean you are selfish or mean. This is how life operates.) Does this mean that life is sad, and that we are uncared for? No, not at all. To be happy, we do not need the love and attention of everyone, or even of many people. We can get all the love we need, and more, if we are genuine and caring.

To put it more simply, if we are noted for three things: that we speak well of people and never slander or calumniate anyone; if we are ready to help people in need (with our time or work or money or competence); if we encourage people for the good they do, without putting them down out of jealousy or power games, we will have genuine friends. People will want us as their friend. Everybody wants friends. All are looking for honest, reliable and genuine persons they can count on and trust. If we are that, we will have good friends, and need not go through life unconnected, our heart starved for affection.

*To summarize it all in a few words:* To tackle aloneness in a healthy way, and grow through it, and not drown in unhealthy forms of loneliness, cultivate your relationship with God. Without it, a happy, purpose-filled celibate life or ministry is not possible. \* Find something worth living for (and dying for). Are there people or causes for which you are ready to make sacrifices cheerfully? \* Take reasonable care of your health. \* Cultivate at least a few deep and genuine friendships, relationships in which you give and receive both loving support and honest feedback. \* Be ready to help anyone who needs you. The priesthood, particularly in settings like India where there all kinds of unmet human needs, offers us many chances everyday to help people. Deeply loving people are seldom lonely. \* At the end of each day,

take time to thank God, and to be grateful to the people who have helped you. \* When faced with personal problems—we all have them—reflect, pray, and talk it over with a reliable person in confidence; don't sit down and brood, or escape into gossip or drinking or childish acting out. \* In our priestly ministry, we need, and have, many moments of aloneness; we can use such times for growth, not for boredom. \* We need not go through life unloved or unconnected. We can get all the love we need, if we are genuine and caring persons. \* In fact, a good priest gets more love and trust than most human beings will ever experience. \* But don't expect someone to be there for you always, or everyone to understand you. This is not possible for anyone. \* The only one who will be there for you always, without fail, is God. God's is the one heart where there is always a place for me. I will be wise to cultivate this one, central relationship diligently, and with love. In doing it, we will experience the truth of His assurance that I am never, never alone. Without this awareness, a happy celibate life or priestly commitment is next to impossible.

A book I am always thrilled to recommend is Etty Hillesum's *An Interrupted Life*. Etty was a young Jewish woman from Holland who died at Auschwitz, the notorious Nazi concentration camp, at the age of twenty-nine. She kept a diary during the last three, harrowing years of her young life. As the diary begins, Etty is an intelligent, passionate, irreligious woman who is more aware of her love of literature and her sexual desires than of anything else. She is also filled with terror, as the Nazis start deporting the Jews to death camps. The diary shows the gradual and moving transformation of this frightened and perceptive young woman from "mortal fear in every fibre" to becoming "the loving heart of the barracks." Many other inmates of the camps, going mad with fear, found strength and peace in her comforting presence. Etty's own secret comes through in one of the entries in the diary: "We can be at home anywhere if we carry home within us."

May we learn to carry our home within us.

We will then be at home anywhere in the world, with any person from any group. We will have a home wherever we go. Better, we will be a loving, healing home for many. Isn't that what we priests and religious are called to be?

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