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(1929-2010)**

**SAINT BRUNO
AND THE
CARTHUSIAN CHARISM TODAY**

(Translated into English by Demetrio S. Yocum of the University of Notre Dame. U.S.A.)¹
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I

Saint Bruno

In October of 2001 the Carthusian Order celebrated the ninth centenary of the death of its founder, Saint Bruno. The first Carthusian passed away on October 6, 1101, in the peace of his hermitage in Calabria. His last words were those of a Profession of Trinitarian Faith that his companions reverently transcribed and partially recorded in an encyclical letter attached to his funerary scroll. Today, the last words of Bruno are all the more precious since only few of his writings remain.

The loss of Bruno was a painful moment not only for his companions in Calabria but also for his brothers of the Chartreuse who, since his departure for Rome, had always hoped to see him again. For those who knew him personally, he was a “man with profound common sense,” an “incomparable father,” a “perfect spiritual guide.” So many praises do not, however, obscure his being a simple monk, which he cherished above all else: his body was buried in the cemetery of the hermitage², in bare earth as is still the custom among Carthusians³. It was not until 1514 that Cardinal Louis Aragon obtained his canonization *vivae vocis oraculo* ‘by word of mouth’, which was followed on November 1 of the same year by the exaltation of his relics and later, in 1623, by the introduction of his feast into the Roman breviary.⁴

¹ Translator’s Note: The late André Louf’s essay “Saint Bruno” was published a few weeks before the ninth centenary of Saint Bruno’s death (October 6, 2001) in *Documents Épiscopat—Bulletin du Secrétariat de la Conférence des Évêques de France* 12–13 (September 2001).

² Today known as the Charterhouse of Serra San Bruno.

³ Bruno was entombed only later, around 1193; his remains were then transferred to the Church of Santa Maria. At first buried under the pavement, the relics were later transferred, after Bruno’s canonization (1514), to the shrine of the church within the Charterhouse, where they are still to this day.

⁴ Bernard Bligny, *Saint Bruno, le premier chartreux* (Rennes: Ouest-France, 1984), provides a pertinent view of the circumstances of Bruno’s canonization: “Undoubtedly, it is astonishing that the Church awaited so long to elevate Bruno to the honors of the altars, when other Carthusians such as Anthelm of Belley and Hugh of Lincoln were canonized well before him. The first reason for this is that during the twelfth century, and still in the thirteenth, the popes canonized primarily bishops (among whom were some who had been monks), something that Saint Bruno refused to be. At the time, the issue was to consolidate the merits of a rehabilitated

It is primarily through the unfolding of his personal history that Saint Bruno of Cologne was to leave his mark on the Order that originated from him. Undoubtedly, his story consists of two distinct parts separated by a break. When Bruno was about fifty years old, he rather abruptly broke away from a life of external service to the Church, as a university teacher, and set off in search of more radical solitude that would allow him to devote his life exclusively to prayer and intimacy with God. For those who saw his situation evolve from the outside, it was all the more unexpected, considering that his contemporaries were at the time expecting to see him occupy the archbishop's seat of Rheims, thus fulfilling an intellectual apostolate that had benefited the best minds of his time with a pastoral ministry.

Born in Cologne around 1030, Bruno had in fact moved in his youth to Rheims, which was then one of the most prestigious cathedral schools in the West. There, he spent a good part of his life in the shadow of its university, first as a student and then as a teacher, counting among his pupils many of the most brilliant minds of the century: Anselm of Laon, who would become Abelard's teacher; Hugh, the future bishop of Grenoble, who would later give the desert of Chartreuse to Bruno; and Eudes de Châtillon, who later, as Pope Urban II, would try in vain to associate Bruno more closely to his papal ministry.

Bruno's final choice of embracing a life of solitude came at the end of a crisis that stirred up the Church of Rheims and saw Bruno vehemently opposing the simoniac Archbishop Manasse, who stripped Bruno of his position and banished him from the diocese. Undoubtedly, this critical situation brought to maturity a call that, as we know from elsewhere, was already for some time discernible in Bruno's heart. In one of his extant letters—sent from Calabria, where Urban II had allowed him to retire—Bruno addresses Raoul Le Verd, an old classmate who was at the time provost of Rheims. Bruno mentions a resolution made by three of them, Bruno, Raoul Le Verd, and Foulcoi le Borgne, after a nighttime conversation in the garden of a certain Adam at whose residence Bruno was lodging at the time. The scene presumably took place in 1080. Hence, Bruno was already about to set off for solitude, when certain unforeseen circumstances forced him to postpone to a later moment the execution of his plan. Alas! This delay proved to be fatal for his two companions, as he himself put it: “the spirit grew cold and the fervor faded away” (*Letter 1.13*, p. 140).

It was only a short time later, precisely when Bruno was nearly fifty and after having refused an episcopal promotion that the good people of Rheims demanded, that he was able to put his plan into action, once again accompanied by two friends. Undoubtedly, Bruno already had an insight into the kind of solitary life he wanted to embrace. New communities at that time were thriving almost everywhere, embodying the whole range of conceivable monastic experiences. However, Bruno did not choose a strictly eremitical form of monastic life:

episcopate after the crisis it experienced from about 950 to circa 1050 and from which it was still slowly recovering. The second reason can be found in the fact that, having withdrawn from the world even in their burial [Carthusians' burial sites are marked only by nameless wooden crosses (trans.)], Carthusians had nothing to offer but a silent testimony whose trace was not easily exploited by hagiography, not least in the case of Bruno, even with regard to his activity as a scholar. Finally, there is a third reason, which is related to their own values: allergic to publicity of any kind, hostile to the abuses that gave rise to the development of the popular cult of saints, they longed for but one glory, that which comes from on high, 'in the company of the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs, the confessors, and the virgins, the flowers of Heaven.' To such vision, in which the Carthusian Adam Scot anticipates Fra Angelico, should be added their lack of interest in bodily matters as compared to the immortal soul, and especially their notion of miracle quite different from the one generally accepted, which holds on to the element of wonder only. Already in sections 23, 47, and 48 of *The Life of St. Hugh Bishop of Grenoble* (written between 1134 and 1136), Guigo could not have been more clear in exalting an 'everyday saintliness', which for the Christian is a matter of 'keeping God' in one's own heart. And just as martyrdom once did, a manifest, tangible miracle paved the way to canonization. Yet Bruno neither excelled in the second nor suffered the first" (106-7).

throughout his entire life, he would never be without companions. Bruno instead turned to an abbot and a community already renowned for its spirit of reform: Saint Robert of Molesmes, who would give him the monastic habit. But the monks of Molesmes were strictly cenobites who followed the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. Some of them would later become the founding fathers of Cîteaux and the Cistercians, a cenobitic Order as well. Apparently Bruno was looking for something else; as a result, Robert of Molesmes gave him permission to withdraw to a nearby territory, at Sèche-Fontaine, probably with the intention to build a hermitage, what we may now consider the first outline of a Carthusian desert. However, this first experience did not quite correspond to Bruno's intuition. Was it that the cenobitic monks of Molesmes were too close and did not sufficiently respect Bruno's solitude? Or was he looking for a more inaccessible desert than the one offered by the charming wooded slopes of the hills on the borders of the Champagne region? In any case, Bruno and his companions turned their attention to the Delfinate, where Hugh, one of his former disciples, came to occupy the episcopal seat of Grenoble. On June 24, 1084, the Feast of Saint John the Baptist, Hugh in person led Bruno and his companions down to a valley set among the rocky slopes of the massif of Chartreuse⁵. There, at a higher elevation than the location of the present buildings of the Grande Chartreuse, they built their first log cabins, which, a few decades later, they were forced to leave after an avalanche that caused the death of several brothers.⁶

Bruno reveals few explicit details about the way his solitary life was effectively organized, but we are left to think that the harmonious union of austere solitude with some elements of community life had already been implemented and represented precisely Bruno's personal plan. When, some decades later, Guigo would put the customs of the community in writing, he would seek to record, "what we normally do," as he would put it—observances which undoubtedly go back to Bruno himself.

How did Bruno come up with such a project? Latin monasticism at the time was inspired mainly by the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which for a couple of centuries became virtually the only monastic rule. And yet this rule is strictly cenobitic, even though Benedict did not ignore eremitical life, having practiced it himself before founding several monasteries; he even left a door discreetly open for those monks who wanted to commit to it, but only after a long training in cenobitic life. Apparently, Saint Benedict was acquainted with eremitical life only in its extreme form, namely living exclusively for God and by oneself, entirely alone, and in absolute seclusion.

Within the thriving foundations and new communities that characterized monastic life in the eleventh century, the specifically eremitical component was revived in various forms. The great majority of these foundations retraced the path of radical solitude, far away from inhabited places. Some hermits also gathered in small communities where the rigor of solitude was mitigated by the presence of other brothers sharing the same aspirations. Several decades

⁵ Hugh of Châteauneuf, elected bishop of Grenoble just three years earlier, was very concerned about a dream: "He had seen in a dream," writes his confidant and biographer Guigo in 1134, "a house being built for God's glory in the solitude of Chartreuse, and seven stars that showed him the way" (*Life of Saint Hugh* (+1132) 3.2; *Patrologia Latina* 153). The prelate was still debating with himself whether the dream was of no consequence or if the Almighty wanted to inspire him to carry out a sacred task when some visitors were shown in. The newcomers, seven in all, longed to consecrate their lives entirely to pure contemplation of the divine perfections and were looking for an isolated locality where they could devote themselves to this vocation far away from the world. As soon as Bruno, the spokesman of the small group, had uttered his request, Hugh realized that God's will had been revealed to him. Thus, on the feast of Saint John the Baptist, in June 1084, he led the small group towards the most isolated place of his diocese, the massif of Chartreuse: it is after this site that they would later be named Carthusians (see *La Grande Chartreuse par un chartreux*, 18e édition, 2007, 14-15).

⁶ The disaster took place on a Saturday, January 30, 1132, after half a century of Carthusian presence on the original site.

before Bruno, an itinerant hermit, Saint Romuald, had spread similar hermitages (*lauras*) throughout Italy, among which the most famous, Camaldoli —not far from Arezzo— has given its name to a monastic family still present today. Thus, beyond Saint Benedict, Western monasticism reclaimed its origins by returning to practices that were considered to have originated in the East.

Guigo, the legislator of Chartreuse, seems well aware of this lineage. Compiling the Carthusian customs, he explicitly refers to Saint Benedict, but also to the Desert Fathers from Egypt and Palestine: Paul (of Thebes), Anthony, and Hilarion. Even more remarkable, at the time when the first Carthusians spread towards the north, is the testimony of a former Benedictine abbot who later in life became Cistercian, William of Saint Thierry. He refers to the brothers of the recent foundation of Mont-Dieu, in the French Ardennes, as those who “have brought the ‘light of the East’ (*Orientalis Lumen*) and the fervor of the ancient Egyptian monks into the darkness of the West and into the cold of Gaul, namely the example of solitary life, a way of life that is reminiscent of heaven” (*Golden Epistle* 1.1, p. 9).

Bruno’s stay among his brothers of Chartreuse lasted only a few years, until Urban II, his former pupil who had become Pope, required him by his side for the preparation of several synods or councils. Bruno obeyed, but he would never feel at home at the papal court. To the brothers who accompanied Bruno, the Pope, aware of their choice of life, offered the quite relative solitude of the long-since faded Baths of Diocletian. Having finally declined the Pope’s offer of Reggio Calabria’s episcopal see, Bruno was again allowed to embrace a life of solitude, not far from another hermitage, where he spent his last days surrounded by the affection of his brothers of Calabria, as well as those of Chartreuse, who always considered him their founder and true father.

In two autograph letters that the tradition has preserved we can find an echo of what Bruno himself thinks of the monastic life he spread wherever he went. The first letter, already quoted, is addressed to Raoul Le Verd, at the time provost of the chapter of Rheims cathedral, to remind him of the vow they once took together. The second is sent to his brothers who had remained at Chartreuse. In this letter Bruno encourages them to persevere in their vocation. In order to improve our understanding of the fundamental intuition of Carthusian eremitism, we can add a third letter to the two written by Bruno: the one written by Guigo, in which he praises solitary life in an attempt to persuade an anonymous friend to join him.

Bruno twice uses the image of *watch* to describe Carthusian life, which may be summarized as *excubiae divinae*, a ‘divine watch’ (*Letter* 1.4). In doing so, Bruno extends to the whole group the practice of nocturnal prayer, learned from the example of Jesus, that has always been an important element particularly dear to the heart of the solitary. It corresponds to a wish explicitly stated by Jesus at a crucial moment in His life: “Are you not able to stay awake for an hour with Me?” (Mk 14:37). Bruno goes further to specify the purpose of such watch: with his brothers, the Carthusian monk mounts “a holy and persevering watch awaiting the return of his Master, ready to open the door as soon as He arrives.” The allusion to the Gospel is clear. It immediately identifies the solitary’s distinctive place throughout the course of the Church. Today we may say, and not without reason, that it is at the heart of this course. Yet the eschatological image used by Bruno can be even more specific: the solitary is also preceding or, better still, leading along this way through time, because he has been invested with the specific mission to mysteriously “hasten” the “coming of the day of God” (2 Pt 3:12).

Another image, which Bruno also uses twice, conjures up a similar spiritual reality, namely that of the port. By distancing himself from the world, the solitary has already arrived safely in port. He “escaped the turbulent waters of this world, where there are so many perils and shipwrecks,” and has now reached “the quiet repose and security of a hidden port” (*Letter*

2.2). Each one of these expressions possesses a very precise meaning —technical as we may say today— in the monastic vocabulary of the time. Let us highlight those meanings.

First, “port” is presented as *tutus et quietus* (“secure and quiet”). Terms that derive from the root word *quies* (*quiescere*, *quietus*) indicate specific realities we associate today with a strictly contemplative life. We will return to this later on, because the term *quies*, ‘rest’, defines one of the essential elements of the Carthusian experience. This rest or *stillness* is primarily attributed to the site where the Carthusian desert is established. When Bruno mentions it he is not thinking about the austere majesty of the Alps of the Delfinate, which retained little fascination for the medieval mind, but rather the exquisite harmony of plains and sweet hills he found in Calabria. Bruno takes pleasure in describing his desert: “its delightful location, its healthy and temperate climate; [it] stretches in a wide, pleasant plain, which lies between the mountains, with verdant pastures and flowery fields.” And he adds, “How can I describe the shape of the hills that rise slightly on all sides, with their hidden, shady valleys where so many rivers, brooks, and springs flow? There are also irrigated gardens and many fruit-bearing trees of various kinds” (*Letter* 1.4).

Such peaceful surroundings are there above all to favor inner stillness, where God is revealed and where one encounters Christ. Later, Guigo, in his *Letter on the Solitary Life* (par. 5), will condense this disposition of the solitary’s heart with a well-worded expression, both simple and very powerful: the Carthusian must be *Christo quietus*: his inner stillness should be entirely centered on Christ. The other technical term of the contemplative vocabulary of the time that we find in Bruno’s writings is *statio*, the act of standing up straight. It alludes to the stability in a place that you leave as little as possible, as well as to the ancient attitude of prayer, which was standing. If stillness is unconstrained and guarded carefully, it is precisely for the sake of prayer. Conversely, this term is similar to and interchangeable with another one with an apparently opposite meaning: *sessio*, the act of sitting alone in one’s cell. Guigo refers to it when he explicitly cites a passage from Lamentations (Lam 3:28) that traditionally had been associated with the solitary and silent life.

The term *quies*, ‘rest’, recalls another equally recurrent one: this stillness ensures *sanctum otium*, a ‘blessed leisure’, also entirely oriented toward God and prayer. Guigo borrows from Saint Augustine a particularly appropriate pun that right away frees this expression from all potential ambiguities: it is *otium negotiosum*, an ‘active leisure’, and as far as it is active, it must nevertheless remain *quieta actio*, a ‘quiet activity’. Augustine had already chided those who, at the time, resented the blessed leisure he enjoyed: “May nobody,” he wrote, “envy my leisure, *quia meum otium magnum habet negotium*,” ‘my leisure conceals an intense activity’ (*Letter* 213.6, p. 57).

For the solitary it is not so much a manual or pastoral activity as this inner activity that is preferred above all else. It culminates in prayer, but it is nourished by all the other monastic practices, among which the assiduous reading of the Word of God occupies the most prominent place, and facilitated by a daily schedule where each activity is gradually fulfilled and comes as rest after what preceded it. Carthusian life is, as Guigo wrote,

...poor and solitary... constant in adversity... modest in success, sober in its way of life, simple in its garments, reserved in its speech, chaste in its mores, the highest ambition, because without ambition...devoted to fasting for its love of the cross, it consents to meals for the body’s need, observing in both the highest moderation...it is devoted to reading, but mostly in the biblical canon and religious books, where it focuses more on the inner marrow of meaning than on the spume of words...it delights in many tasks finding itself more frequently short of time than of various occupations, so that it complains more often about time, always slipping away, than of the nuisance of work (*Letter on the solitary life*, p. 4).

And Guigo brought to an end this long list—which we have shortened— by citing again Augustine’s pun: *sic est continua in otio, quod numquam est otiosa*, ‘our life is constant in leisure, while never being idle’.

This intense activity, however, is essentially solitary. It neither implies an intellectual activity oriented toward the world, which Bruno deliberately left behind, nor a pastoral responsibility within the Church, which he avoided or would later reject and from which he tries to dissuade his friend Raoul Le Verd, the chancellor for the archdiocese of Rheims. Bruno has no scruples whatsoever in persuading Raoul to abandon pastoral responsibilities. Besides, he seems to identify pastoral activity with the many preoccupations it necessarily entails as well as with the worldly ambitions it may secretly fuel. Un-doubtedly, Bruno admits that the active life is more fecund—like Leah, who gave more children to Jacob, rather than Rachel, who was more beautiful and amiable. Bruno borrows this allegorical interpretation from Gregory the Great, according to whom a period of apostolic service is logically followed by a more ardent phase of contemplative life (*Pastoral Rule* 2.11, p. 86-88). “Indeed, more rare are the children of contemplation than those of action,” Bruno writes; “nevertheless, Joseph and Benjamin were cherished by their father more than their other brothers were” (*Letter* 1.6). In such a context, a discreet allusion to the Gospel passage about Mary of Bethany is not out of place, as it was, in the eyes of the Fathers of the Church, emblematic of the value of contemplative life, and indeed, Bruno concludes, “This is the better part Mary has chosen, which will not be taken away” (Lk 10:42).

Moreover, for the founder of Chartreuse renouncing a position in a university where he was a professor meant taking another: from now on he would become a disciple, but this time of a teaching that surpasses all that human knowledge can bestow. Undoubtedly, it is primarily his university career, left behind for the love of Christ, that Bruno has in mind when he presents Carthusian life as an alternative school, where the one who wants to become Christ’s disciple is put directly under the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit to learn the secrets of an entirely divine philosophy. Bruno thus aligns himself with a recurrent theme of the great Tradition that loved to see in a life completely consecrated to the search for God the most excellent form of the *true philosophy*. “Who cannot see,” Bruno writes to his former classmate of Rheims, “how beneficial and delightful it is to stay at the school of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to learn the divine philosophy, which alone can give true happiness?” (*Letter* 1.10). Bruno unveils a little the pedagogic method used by the Holy Spirit in a passage from his *Letter to His Brothers of Chartreuse*, in which he specifically addresses the group of lay brothers of the community, typically illiterate lay people and therefore usually unable to read the Scriptures that Bruno, for his part, holds in great consideration. It does not matter! Although these brothers are unable to read, they receive an interior teaching directly infused in them by the Spirit, in view of a wisdom that the more educated monks of the cloister have nothing to envy. This passage is worth citing, as it may be the only text of the time dedicated to the condition of lay brothers:

As for you, my beloved lay brothers...: I also rejoice because, even though you are not educated, God almighty carves with His own finger on your hearts not only love but the knowledge of God’s holy law: indeed you show with your deeds what you really love and know. For you put into practice with all possible care and zeal true obedience, which is the fulfillment of God’s will, the key and the seal of all spiritual observance: it never exists without great humility and outstanding patience, and it always comes with a chaste love of the Lord and genuine charity. Hence, it is evident that you wisely gather the sweetest and most refreshing fruit of the divine Scriptures (Letter 2.3).

This passage is remarkable in that it confirms that, in a contemplative life properly lived, the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit can replace the knowledge acquired through reading, or even through *lectio divina*.

However, this experience of the Holy Spirit's personal guidance can be understood and spoken about only by those who have been actually called and have taken the risk of paying the price. In effect, Bruno is fully aware that not all the baptized are called to follow Christ in such a rigorous desert where all diversions are excluded. Not everyone who wants can become a hermit. If Bruno takes the liberty to insist with Raoul Le Verd, it is only because Bruno believes his friend is bound to do so by the vow he once took. But when he addresses his own brothers, he underlines the rather exceptional nature of their vocation and at the same time the distinctive grace it represents on the part of God towards them, which should become a source of joy and unending gratitude. Here is how Bruno addresses them, in a passage where perhaps we can perceive the memory of a certain number of aspirants who, then as now, had to give up after an attempt nevertheless sincere:

Rejoice then my beloved brothers over your blessed fate and the abundance of grace that God has bestowed upon you...Rejoice that you have reached the quiet rest and safety of a hidden port: many would like to get there, and there are many who make a considerable effort to do so, but fail in their attempt. What is more, after reaching it, many are rejected because none of them had received the grace from above. Therefore, my brothers, consider this as a proven and certain fact: whoever has enjoyed such a desirable good and then for whatever reason loses it will regret it forever (Letter 2.2).

Bruno evokes the wonders God usually performs in the desert—beyond the trials and temptations on which he does not dwell at length—in these words: “the benefits and divine exultation in store for those who love the solitude and silence of the desert.” He immediately goes on to describe them in a celebrated passage cited in all the collections dedicated to solitary life:

Indeed, here [in the desert] men of strong will can enter into themselves and dwell there as much as they like, diligently cultivating the seeds of virtue and eating with joy the fruits of Paradise. Here we can acquire that eye that wounds the divine Bridegroom with love by the clarity of its gaze and whose purity allows us to see God. Here we can observe a busy leisure and find rest in quiet activity. Here, for the toil of battle, God's athletes are given the longed-for reward: that peace which the world ignores and joy in the Holy Spirit (Letter 1.6).

This is indeed a dense passage, where the biblical or traditional images and allusions overlap. Worth noticing is a discreet allusion to the harshness that the battle of solitude may entail: the toil of battle requires “men of strong will,” and “athletes.” “Entering into oneself” and “dwelling with oneself,” the latter expression taken from Saint Gregory who applies it to Saint Benedict (*Dialogues*, Book 2, p. 62), denote the inner contemplation that allows the solitary to keep watch on his desires and direct them, continually and peacefully, toward God. This is the asceticism, or the quite distinctive effort of those who live only for God. Gregory defines it as follows: “In this solitude, the venerable Benedict dwelt with himself insofar as he kept himself inside the cloister of his thoughts,” *in quantum se intra cogitationis claustra custodivit (Dialogues*, Book 2, p. 64). Inner contemplation purifies the heart in love with God, while the gaze wounds the divine Bridegroom, Who is thus willing in return to let His love be savored, infusing in the solitary's soul peace and joy, which are the fruits of the Spirit. It is reported that Bruno was usually found walking in the fields repeating what had become in him the cry of his heart, and un-doubtedly his favorite ejaculatory prayer: “*O Bonitas!*”

II

The Carthusian charism today

Life in Lauras

Since its origins the charism of Christian evangelical life has been lived in many and various ways. It first took shape in the renunciation of marriage among the ascetics and virgins already present in the early Church. Apparently, they very soon began to form specific groups within Christian communities. In the Aramaic-speaking churches these groups were called *sons and daughters of the covenant*. The word *covenant* here refers to the unique bond these ascetics had developed by means of their vow of celibacy in the heart of the Church. At the beginning, they were perfectly integrated in the ecclesiastical structures, from which they did not want to be separated. It was only in the first half of the fourth century that some Christians started to withdraw to the deserts of Egypt and to the mountains of Asia Minor. Saint Athanasius, the archbishop of Alexandria, became the defender of this unique and often misunderstood way of life in his famous *Life of Saint Antony*, which, promptly translated into Latin, spread to the West, where it played an essential role in Saint Augustine's conversion.

Undoubtedly, the first monks intended to live completely alone in the desert. However, they ended up attracting disciples eager to place themselves under their teaching. This was the origin of the monastic communities that since then have developed in two parallel forms: on the one hand, communities of cenobites where a relatively strict communal life provided mutual support for the brothers, and on the other the communities of hermits who lived alone in caves or cells but used to gather regularly, usually on Sundays, to celebrate the liturgy. At the end of the fourth century, these two forms of monastic life spread rapidly throughout the Christian world.

As for the second, eremitical lifestyle, two forms seem to have been favored in the East. The first was the *laura* that spread throughout Egypt, Palestine, and Asia Minor. *Lauras* were characterized by colonies of several individual cells whose dwellers used to gather only on specific occasions, as we will see later on. The second, more generally practiced within the Syrian Church, it seems, was a form of monastic life consisting of two phases, a more strictly cenobitic phase meant to prepare for life in solitude, and then the solitary phase itself, to which the monk was admitted after a more or less prolonged period of training in the virtues of community life.

By contrast, in the West, cenobitic life prevailed, especially after the ninth century, when the *Rule of Saint Benedict* literally supplanted all other rules in force until then. In the eleventh century, however, as was mentioned in Part 1 of this article, a strong trend toward eremitical life emerged initially in Italy under the influence of Saint Romuald and his first disciples who tried to integrate in one single institution both cenobitic and eremitical groups, along with hermits living in absolute seclusion. The same trend can be seen in Gaul under the influence of Saint Bruno, who was to some extent inspired by the Palestinian *lauras*. But both Bruno and Romuald shared a similar intent: to integrate, as harmoniously as possible, solitary and communal life by gradually drawing the benefits from both traditions. If, therefore, the Camaldolese of Saint Romuald is at the beginning a cenobite but aiming, at a time chosen by God, toward a more challenging solitude, the Carthusian of Saint Bruno is a solitary from the start for whom the risks of reclusion are mitigated by a discreet dose of communal life.

Further, the life in Bruno's Charterhouse offers other *prescriptions*, so to speak, and other harmonies between the solitary and the cenobitic regimes. In fact, together with the *cloister monks* (called *fathers* because usually ordained), who spend most of the day in their cells celebrating the minor hours of the Divine Office, eating, dedicating time to the listening of the Word of God and to the Jesus prayer, as well as doing manual work, Carthusian communities include in their fold a certain number of *lay brothers*. Although the brothers enjoy solitude like the fathers, with whom they share the same contemplative vocation, lay brothers are called to spend more time out of their cells in order to perform certain tasks for the monastery, thus ensuring the welfare of the entire community. Some of the brothers, of course take solemn vows, namely the *converse* brothers, while others, the *donate* brothers, are only affiliated with the community by means of a promise and a mutually binding agreement. Hence the latter can live their vocation more in harmony with their personal interests and according to the possibilities of their health.

Moreover, almost since the very beginning, there is a female branch of the Carthusian Order. It is currently represented by two monasteries in France, two in Italy, and one in Spain. The life of the Carthusian nuns is characterized by the same strictly contemplative orientation and offers the same possibilities of organizing, as harmoniously as possible, the benefits of solitary and communal life. Within the Order, the female branch benefits from a relative autonomy with its own general chapter.

The Desert of the Cell

Like all other forms of contemplative life, the Carthusian Order is characterized by a call to the desert, following in the footsteps of the Jewish people in the wilderness of Sinai and following the Lord Himself, Who inaugurated His public life in the desert, where afterwards He often withdrew to meet His Father in solitary vigils and prayer. Among the many aspects of Christ's life here on earth that can be imitated by those who want to follow Him, there is the protracted time of prayer in solitude that the Carthusians have taken upon themselves to prolong in the heart of the Church and of the world. They are among those who, according to Pope John Paul II's post-synodal exhortation *Vita Consacrata*, have chosen to "follow Christ praying on the mountain" (par. 14).

In essence, Carthusian solitude expresses a fairly radical withdrawal from the world, thanks to cloistered life, which implies a consequent reduction of contacts with the world. Parents and siblings are authorized to visit once or twice a year, whereas friends' and acquaintances' visits are exceptional. Correspondence is deliberately limited and requires authorization from superiors. No radio, television, or newspapers: the relevant news from the Church and the world reaches the monks through the Prior, who updates them at the chapter on Sundays. Some journals of theology and spirituality circulate among the cells. Except for the weekly communal walk, the well-known *spatiamentum*, trips outside the cloister are limited to health-related issues. And that is it regarding the contacts with the outer world.

However, solitude is even more amplified thanks to the monks' permanence in the cell, better still, in the *eremos*, which is given to Carthusians as their new dwelling place. It resembles a real little house with a room (the cell strictly speaking) where there is an oratory for prayer, a workshop, a walkway, a little cloistered garden, where the Carthusian cannot be seen by anyone, and a storage place, where firewood for winter can be stored.

It is to this intimate space, sometimes a battlefield but also the place of encounter with the Lord, that the Carthusian feels called, so to speak. The cell is left only for the night vigil, the conventual Mass, and vespers, while the liturgy of the other Hours is celebrated in the oratory

of the cell. As for the other departures (to go to the library, for example, or to visit the Prior or spiritual director), the Carthusian arranges them in order not to prolong the time of separation from the place felt as one's own natural habitat. Because of this quite rigorous seclusion, the Carthusian vocation still today bears witness to the life of the many recluses whom the medieval West came to know. Further, it is still the ancient prayer of *inclusio*, proper to the medieval rite of seclusion, that the Prior today recites over the novice when the latter, after being given the habit, is solemnly led to the new cell. From now on, the Carthusian is, in Saint Bernard of Clairvaux's beautiful words, *amore Christi inclusus*, 'a recluse for the love of Christ'.

It is in fact the exclusive attachment to Christ that the Carthusian will try to express through the rigors and, at the same time, the joys of solitude, as it is only the love that Christ had first for the Carthusian that may explain the reason for *abiding in Him* in this way, for *dwelling in His love*, in the *shadow of His wings*, and in the *secrecy of His face*. A passage from the Statutes of the Order describes what the solitary should expect from such seclusion:

The one who faithfully perseveres in the cell and lets himself be molded by it tends to make his whole life one continual prayer. But he cannot enter into that rest without going through the ordeal of a tough fight. These are both the austerities to which he applies himself by living in fidelity to the law of the cross, and the visits of the Lord, Who comes to try him as gold in the furnace. Hence, purified by patience, nourished and strengthened by assiduous meditation of the Scriptures, led by the grace of the Holy Spirit into the depths of his heart, from now on he will not only serve, but cling to God (Statutes 1.3.2).

The last sentence is taken from the already mentioned *Golden Epistle* that William of Saint Thierry addressed to the Carthusians of Mont-Dieu: "Others are asked to serve God, you are asked to cling to Him." William also adds, "Others are asked to believe, know, love and worship God; you instead are asked to taste, understand, enjoy, and be familiar with God" (*Golden Epistle* 1.16, p. 14). To "cling" in this way is what the faithful stability to the cell will teach the Carthusian, according to an ancient saying of the Desert Fathers, later reproduced in *The Imitation of Christ*: "Sit in your cell, and it will teach you everything."⁷

Temptation in the Desert: An Experience of the Church

No text of Scripture better illustrates the significance of being put to the test in the desert than the one in which a Deuteronomist scribe handed down to us his reflections on the experience of the people of God during the forty years spent in the desert as narrated in the book of Exodus:

You will remember all the way that the Lord, your God, has led you for forty years through the desert, in order to afflict and test you to know what was in your heart and find out whether or not you would keep His commandments. He afflicted you by letting you hunger, then gave you to eat manna which neither you nor your fathers knew, to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Dt 8:2-3).

For Jesus, Who upon coming into this world wanted to take upon himself all human weaknesses and poverty, the temptations of the desert were necessary as well. After all, they were not His, but rather ours. It is through them that Jesus could, so to speak, have contact

⁷ Abba Moses, in *The Book of the Elders: Systematic Collection*, 2.19 (Cistercian Studies Series, 240), Collegeville, MN, 2012, p. 19. Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 1.20.

with the triple congenital disease of sinners —sensuality, wealth, and power— and triumph over them by means of the Word of God and in the power of the Spirit.

Undoubtedly, regardless of the concrete shape of one's own solitude, the desert usually won't take long to reveal its double face to the candidate who aspires to embrace it. The singing in lyrical terms of the joys of a still very romanticized desert won't last long. Only later, much later, after having gone through the burning furnace of temptations, surviving thanks only to the power of the risen Christ at work within oneself, will the solitary be able to sing again, finally with wholly sincere inflections. But in the beginning temptation will be inexorably there, waiting. Soon solitude becomes as heavy as lead. The dreary and monotonous days passing by generate tedium. The lack of exterior distractions throws the solitary back on oneself, and all the previously unacknowledged desires still swarming in one's heart reveal themselves now as shameful. In the clamor of the outer world, these desires were merely dormant. Now they awaken and dash to occupy an accessible empty field, deep into the most precious niches of the heart, even during the time dedicated to the reading of the Bible and the prayer of the heart. The demons that painters like Hieronymus Bosch or Salvador Dali, or writers like Gustave Flaubert, have portrayed surrounding Saint Antony and his followers, are nothing else but the projections of what the solitaries discover of the sinful and weak in themselves. The aspirants to solitude are very soon convinced that they are no better than anyone else. Solitude purifies them of all their illusions and myths⁸. It teaches them to be simply human beings, in all their weakness and poverty, who experience deep in themselves the whole range of emotions, from the most carnal to the most spiritually refined, but who are, from now on, subject only to the power of God's grace, if it is God's good will. Often, though, this assurance can momentarily be lacking.

Such experience involves risks and, all things considered, it is both incisive and decisive. The risk-nature of this experience is not so much because of the dull feelings and sense of apparent uselessness that never cease to arise in the solitary's heart, but rather because of the awareness of one's own radical weakness, the very inability to persevere in the desert without a miracle that the solitary feels to have no right to. Isn't the building of a *comfort zone* and settling down there —for example, in solitary hyperactivity or excessive reading— in order to

⁸ The testimony of a young Carthusian that he titled "Jacob's Wrestling" well illustrates this point:

"God resists the proud but gives his grace to the humble' (1 Pt 5:5). The desert is a purifying fire. In solitude, what we really are comes to the surface. All the meanness that we have allowed to enter in ourselves is made manifest, all the evil dwelling in us is unveiled. We come to face our own misery, our radical weakness, our absolute helplessness.

Here it is no longer possible to dissimulate the expedients we normally adopt to hide these aspects of ourselves that we dislike and that are particularly distant from the desire of God Who sees and knows all. It becomes evident that we justify ourselves too easily when we consider our defects as personality traits.

Here we become vulnerable; there is no way out: no distraction to appease, or excuse to justify ourselves. It is impossible to avoid coming to terms with what we are, to turn the gaze away from our hopeless misery that leaves us completely naked.

Here the false structures, all the walls we built to protect our-selves, crumble. For who could say how often we try to deceive ourselves—as much as, and even more, than we do others! But the pretense of knowing divine realities dissolves in the presence of God who remains totally Other.

It is a narrow path, in darkness groping one's way and guided only by faith, yet it is a journey of truth. All our personal reserves will remain entangled among the thorns along the path, leaving us with this one and only certainty: by ourselves, we can do nothing.

This is where God awaits us, because a vessel cannot be filled unless it has been emptied, and if God wants to fill us, we should first be stripped of what is in the way. To achieve an infinitely delicate task, the divine Artist needs matter that does not oppose resistance. Then, His hands will know how to work wonders from our misery that will remain hidden from our eyes. All our joy will consist in being transformed by the One Whose name is: Love."

mitigate the pressure of the divine call the most pernicious temptation assailing the solitary? A certain kind of spirituality, essentially pagan, may have induced the solitary to regard solitude as the land of the brave. As Schiller once proclaimed: “Der Starke ist am mächtigsten allein!”* which means ‘The strong man is never as strong as when he is alone!’ Instead, it is precisely in solitude that the solitaries see themselves desperately facing their most evident weakness. As the author of Deuteronomy had already put it, God led his people in the desert in order to “afflict them” (Dt 8:2). There is no other authentically *Christian* desert.

In the fourth century, one of the masters of the spirituality of the desert, Evagrius Ponticus, even created a technical term to describe the feeling of aridity, bordering on despair, that can then settle in the heart of the solitary, a term that has survived until today in our language, though with a significantly weakened sense: *acedia*. Evagrius’s description reveals to what depth, both psychological and spiritual, this purification takes place in the human heart. *Acedia* puts the heart into question to its very core, while it is accompanied most of the time by the feeling of God’s unfathomable distance or total absence. This sense of the absence of God, also known as *God’s dereliction*, in the presence of which the solitary persists meekly and humbly, is after all comparable with one of the most common religious experiences of modernity. Today, in fact, many often experience God as the great absent one. Some years ago they would have been called atheists but today more properly agnostics. Such an experience, despite appearances, is nevertheless truly religious, and the solitary ends up feeling very close to it. Besides, it re-enacts in the solitary the Father’s apparent abandonment that Jesus experienced at the heart of His own loneliness on Calvary, “Father, Father, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mt 27:46). A great nun of modern times, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, endured such a period of trial to the extreme during the year before her death, going so far as not to dare to put into words what she was suffering lest she be considered blasphemous: “Dearest Mother, the image I wanted to give you of the darkness obscuring my soul is as imperfect as a sketch compared with its model, but I don’t want to keep writing about it, I fear I’m committing blasphemy... I already feel I have gone too far mentioning it.”⁹

Thus, more than anyone else, the contemplative becomes, as just suggested, an expert on atheism. Such an experience has nothing disturbing at all. Our feelings and our words are too limited to define God. Believers have no hold over God. Since they are each time asked to put aside their own ideas and memories of the divine, they cannot but have the impression that God is dead —as is in fact partly true. For the god that is the product of the believer’s projections and primordial fears actually does not exist. The true God is infinitely greater, and we must necessarily renounce the world of our spontaneous concepts of God before being able to perceive a little who God really is. This experience is similar to real death, and solitude is its most effective furnace. This fact shouldn’t be surprising, because nobody can see God and live. God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). Some masters of the solitary life have compared the monastic cell with Christ’s paschal tomb, where the solitary lives “hidden with Christ in God,” expecting the glory of Resurrection to come. Still today, on Holy Saturday, no liturgical office is celebrated in Carthusian churches, and the Carthusians never leave their solitary posts, thus identifying themselves, through the sacrament of the cell, with Jesus’ paschal death.

It is there that the solitary will stay from now on, on the threshold of the abyss of the heart, like a beggar stretching out the hand hesitantly, but at the same time with confidence, an empty hand that only God’s love can fill. How? To what extent? Scantly, or to the brim? All at once, or only after a life consumed in hopeful expectation? The solitaries cannot tell, and all they know is that they cannot demand or complain about anything. However, in this night

⁹ Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul* (Manuscript C), 3rd edition, Washington D.C., 1996, p. 213.

of the soul, in which they ignore whether it leads to greater darkness or whether further ahead light will be there waiting, they are ever more assured that God compensates every one, without exception, far more than what can be asked or imagined. Besides, a little at a time, the desert bears its fruit. Desolation and intimate joy alternate in the rhythm of grace: in the hour of trial it is the purifying —yet so beneficial— fire of the absence, or even apparent death, of God; in the hour of unexpected visitation, the splendor of God’s face, like a radiant light in the depths of the heart. On the one hand, one feels cut off from the human family, as the “scum of the world” (1 Cor 4:13). On the other, one realizes at once that God is deeply connected to all human beings “in the heart of the earth” (Mt 12:40), or in the heart of the world. It is as if one were displaced and unhinged, losing one’s life (Lk 17:33), and then returned to oneself and learned to recognize one’s identity deep in the new name that only Jesus knows (Rev 2:17) and keeps whispering to the solitary’s ear during prayer. Hence the solitaries learn, day after day, to fill their solitude with the prayer that slowly grows within them, in bereaving distress as in comforting joy. Solitude and prayer conform to each other. In the end, they are in perfect harmony. Solitude has become the familiar setting for prayer, in which aridity and consolation alternate and permeate each other, until prayer ends up dwelling in solitude, and solitude ends up giving birth to prayer, like the maternal breast bearing its fruit (see William of Saint Thierry, *Golden Epistle* 1.34, p. 22).

Stillness

This true wrestling with God, through the solitary’s personal poverty, one day will lead to an extraordinary peace, but it will come from elsewhere. This is another reason that the test lasts so long: to help the solitary realize the origin of the peace. Gradually, this peace will penetrate the solitary’s heart, at first, though, without his or her knowledge, for it is momentarily concealed by the inner turmoil of the struggle. It is a sign of an important spiritual event, then, when the *divine unknowing*—the Trinitarian life itself that all the baptized carry in their hearts as in a temple, though generally without feeling its practical benefits—gently rises to consciousness. Each language of the Christian tradition has its specific term for expressing this feeling, so typical of the Christian mystical experience yet incomprehensible for those who have never personally experienced it. We have already discussed the Latin term for this experience as we have found it in Bruno’s writings.¹⁰ In all languages the term aims to describe an essential element. The Byzantine tradition has called it *hesychia*, stillness, a term preserved today in *hesychast*, which still designates the monks and nuns more exclusively consecrated to the solitary life. In the Syriac tradition there are other terms, among which the most common is *shelyô*, which stresses the absence of all activity and the absolute supremacy of divine action. The Latin tradition certainly does not lack similar ones, among which the most eloquent is undoubtedly *quies*, ‘rest’ which became popular thanks to Gregory the Great but was already present in the ancient Latin translations of the first monastic documents.

In French we could restore honor to a term very popular until the seventeenth century, *quiétude*, had it not, unfortunately, at that same time been burdened with ambiguities resulting from a deplorable controversy making it now impossible to call a solitary consecrated to contemplative life a *quietist*. However, it is always possible to borrow the term *hesychast* from the Byzantine tradition. In the past, the Carthusians called one of their charterhouses in Savoy (Piedmont, Italy, now occupied by Carmelites) *Le Reposoir*, ‘resting place’, the exact

¹⁰ See the discussion of *quies* in Part I.

translation of *hesychastirion*, the term Greek monks reserve for their more strictly contemplative monasteries.

Whether such inner peace is experienced in the sweetness of one's own transformed interior senses, or through the always relatively opaque veil of faith, it does not depend on the solitary alone. It is guided by divine pedagogy whose meaning will be revealed only in the world to come. In the meantime, it will suffice to be completely open to the desires and the will of God, Who is also the solitary's Spouse. No one has offered a better description of this abandonment, so typical of eremitical spirituality and also a synonym of perfect charity, than Dom Pierre Doyère, O.S.B., in his article in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (DS) dedicated to the Western eremitical tradition:

Solitaries consider the heights of prayer inaccessible to their own will. Although they may be regarded as desirable goals, they know that only God can lead them there. At the beginning of the journey, the divine call makes them perceptible only through a rigorous discipline of penitence, poverty, humility, silence, and struggle. It is neither to complete one's individuality nor to protect it, that one comes to the desert, but rather to dissolve it—most certainly the least lyrical of offerings—and to keep of oneself only the imperceptible void where the unique Presence abides. If God, sovereign master of all graces, accepts this hidden, painful ascent without inviting the soul to more intimate and mystical pleasures and joys, the solitary's humility would not be in the least surprised or perturbed.¹¹

Spiritual Freedom

Viewed from the outside, Carthusian life can give the impression of being rigorously arranged in a set of rules, ascetic practices, and mostly vocal prayers, hardly ever intended to be mitigated or eluded. It is true that at the beginning of the initiation process, novices, still inexperienced in spiritual ways, are asked to respect a rather fixed schedule—lest they end up astray or carried away by their first impressions. But perhaps, here more than elsewhere, the outer rule does take on a *pedagogic* role (see Gal 3:24) on the path toward spiritual freedom, gradually revealing the inner rule, which is the Holy Spirit in the depth of the heart. Thus, after the years of formation, the Carthusian enjoys a certain freedom, supported by a spiritual father, in planning daily activities in view of a greater spiritual benefit. This freedom is required of them not only by the great eremitical tradition but also by a chapter of the Statutes that well epitomizes it in the following words:

Preserving the quality of our life depends more on the fidelity of each one than on the multiplication of laws, or the updating of customs, or even the action of Priors. It is not enough to obey our superiors and observe faithfully the letter of the Statutes, unless we allow the Spirit to lead us, in order to feel and live according to the Spirit. Each monk, from the very beginning of his new life, finds himself in solitude and is left to his own counsel. He is no longer a child, but a man who is not tossed to and fro and carried about with every new wind, but knows how to discern what pleases God and does it of his own free will, enjoying with sober wisdom that freedom of God's children, concerning which he is responsible before the Lord. However, no one should trust his own judgment; for the one who neglects to open his heart to a reliable guide will lack discernment and advance

¹¹ Pierre Doyère, "Érémisme en Occident", *DS* 5:953-82, here 979.

less quickly than is necessary, or go too fast and grow weary, or fall asleep if he keeps dragging along (Statutes 4.33.2).

In the Heart of the Church and the World

Evagrius Ponticus, a famous Desert Father of the fourth century, who was a philosopher before withdrawing to the desert, described the role of monks in the heart of the Church with an aphorism included in the Carthusian statutes (4.34.2): “A monk is one who is separated from all, but united to all”¹². Sixteen centuries later, Saint Thérèse of the Infant Jesus indicated the role of contemplatives in Christ’s mystical body by identifying them with the heart and with love. Somewhere in between the two, in the twelfth century, Saint Bernard, in a rather unknown text found only in 1964, used the less noble image of the entrails. But the Saint of Lisieux would certainly have agreed with the explanation Bernard provides. According to Bernard, monastic life represents, curiously enough, the “entrails” of the Church, *venter Ecclesiae*, its subsistence and support, *sustamentum*: “For it is from the entrails,” he explains, “that nourishment is distributed to the entire body. Similarly, the role of the monks consists in providing spiritual lymph to the people in charge as well as the subordinates.”¹³

In the apostolic Constitution *Umbratilem* that approved the Statutes of the Carthusian Order after their revision on the basis of the Code of Canon Law of 1917, Pius XI praised contemplative life as being “much more” useful (*multo plus*) for the progress of the Church than the active life of those who actually work in the fields of the Lord. But perhaps it is unnecessary to gauge the worth of any Christian life according to its apostolic efficacy, or anything else. Perhaps it would be better to consider it from God’s perspective, how God may regard and evaluate it; God, Who, generation after generation, continues to attract souls to a more intimate union despite the criticisms and incomprehension that this always entails. Such criticisms and misunderstandings, even if they often find a certain audience within the secularized world, even among some believers, do not seem in the least to weaken the faith and beliefs of those who have been effectively called to such life. They know from experience to what extent they are, though separated from everyone, in the heart of the Church and of the world, but especially how they have become the object of an entirely unmerited mercy on the part of God, Who has chosen them for such ministry. In the end, only in God can the ultimate explanation be found for a life completely oriented toward such intimate relationship. God is involved from the very beginning, for God has thus decided. It is as though, generation after generation, God decides to set apart some souls, revealing to them more fully the divine presence here below, and making them special vessels through which the whole world can be reached. No one could have chosen such vocation if God, Who had already decided to be revealed in such a manner, had not irresistibly attracted the solitary from the start. In this sense, it is not so much the effectiveness of contemplative life in relation to the Church and the world that can be called into question, but rather its relevance in relation to God. The divine joy stemming from the contemplative life of a few thus ends up in blessings on God’s entire creation.

The Carthusians are there only for this reason. Their ecclesiastical responsibilities are among the most limited, like the prophets who, on the threshold of the desert, come proclaiming the only word for which they know they were sent by God, in a steadfast and

¹² Evagrius, “On Prayer,” *The Philokalia: The Complete Text Compiled by Saint Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and Saint Makarios of Corinth*, 3 vols, London: Faber, 1979-84, v. 1:55-71, here 69 (n. 124).

¹³ Cited in H. M. Rochais and Irene Binont, “La collection de textes divers du Manuscrit Lincoln 129 et Saint Bernard,” *Sacris erudiri* 15 (1964): 16-219, here 74.

confident endeavor of petition and prayer. They don't whisper any other word. Incessantly, they utter the Name of the transcendental and mysterious God, so far away and difficult to reach, together with the name of the beloved Son, at once so close and yet always hidden from view. However, thanks to an extended practice of *hesychia*, the Carthusians realize that both are actively present, somewhere deep in their hearts.

It is there that the Carthusians are called to *dwell* from now on, tenderly established in the Name of the Beloved, without worrying about what others may think of them and without asking themselves futile questions. Hence, giving themselves to the Lord, they are ever more open to their confreres, transformed into creatures pouring out self-effacing tenderness, forgiveness, and availability. The Carthusians have no other ministry in the heart of the Church apart from letting themselves be thus transformed by the Spirit of Jesus in His own image. Relieved from all other exterior services, and therefore more free without leaving their desert, the Carthusians dedicate themselves to the ministry of the Spirit, namely, praise and intercession.

Already worthwhile in itself, Carthusian life also has significance as witness. The way it appears in the eyes of believers and of the world does not fail to arouse questions to which Carthusians, in their own typical fashion, reply with silence. As it is stated in the Statutes,

“Through our profession, we turn only to the God Who is, thus testifying to a world, excessively absorbed in earthly things, that there is no god but God. Our life shows that the joys of heaven are already present here below; it is a sign that prefigures our Resurrection, a foretaste of the renewed universe” (4.34.3).

After all, solitude, in one way or another, becomes inevitably part of all human experience, and even more so of all Christian experience. In this sense, Carthusian life may be considered emblematic for all those who come face to face with their own solitude:

The solitude of the monk or that of the hermit, even the relative solitude of the Christian in “retreat”: they all truly belong to Christian spirituality. Every Christian aspires to return to God. No true commitment to the mystery of the Incarnation can contradict the mystery of divine Transcendence, and no chosen soul can become aware of this mystery without understanding and longing for solitude, whose absolute symbol is the hermit's desert (Doyère, DS 5, 981).

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