

# **A Letter of Guigo 5th Prior of the Grande Chartreuse about the solitary life**

(TRANSLATED BY THOMAS MERTON)<sup>1</sup>

To the Reverend N., Guigo, least of those servants of the Cross who are in the Charterhouse to live and to die... for Christ.

One man will think another happy. I esteem him happy above all who does not strive to be lifted up with great honors in a palace, but who elects, humble, to live like a poor country man in a hermitage; who with thoughtful application loves to meditate in peace; who seeks to sit by himself in silence.

For to shine with honors, to be lifted up with dignities is in my judgment a way of little peace, subject to perils, burdened with cares, treacherous to many, and to none secure. Happy in the beginning, perplexed in its development, wretched in its end. Flattering to the unworthy, disgraceful to the good, generally deceptive to both. While it makes many wretched, it satisfies none, makes no one happy.

But the poor and lonely life, hard in its beginning, easy in its progress, becomes, in its end, heavenly. It is constant in adversity, trusty in hours of doubt, modest in those of good fortune. Sober fare, simple garments, laconic speech, chaste manners. The highest ambition, because without ambition. Often wounded with sorrow at the thought of past wrong done, it avoids present, is wary of future evil. Resting on the hope of mercy, without trust in its own merit, it thirsts after heaven, is sick of earth, earnestly strives for right conduct, which it retains in constancy and holds firmly for ever. It fasts with determined constancy in love of the cross, yet consents to eat for the body's need. In both it observes the greatest moderation for when it dines it restrains greed and when it fasts, vanity. It is devoted to reading, but mostly in the Scripture canon and in holy books where it is more intent upon the inner marrow of meaning than on the froth of words. But you may praise or wonder more at this: that such a life is continually idle yet never lazy. For it finds many things indeed to do, so that time is more often lacking to it than this or that occupation. It more often laments that its time has slipped away than that its business is tedious.

What else? A happy subject, to advise leisure, but such an exhortation seeks out a mind that is its own master, concerned with its own business disdaining to be caught up in the affairs of others, or of society. Who so fights as a soldier of Christ in peace as to refuse double service as a soldier of God and a hireling of the world. Who knows for sure it cannot here be glad with this world and then in the next reign with God.

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Small matters are these, and their like, if you recall what drink He took at the gibbet, Who calls you to kingship. Like it or not, you must follow the example of Christ poor if you would have fellowship with Christ in His riches. If we suffer with Him, says the Apostle, we shall reign with Him. If we die with Him, then we shall live together with Him. The Mediator Himself replied to the two disciples who asked Him if one of them might sit at His right hand and the other at His left: "Can you drink the chalice which I am about to drink?" Here He made clear that it is by cups of earthly bitterness that we come to the banquet of the Patriarchs and to the nectar of heavenly celebrations.

Since friendship strengthens confidence I charge, advise and beg you, my best beloved in Christ, dear to me since the day I knew you, that as you are farseeing, careful, learned and most acute, take care to save the little bit of life that remains still unconsumed, snatch it from the world, light under it the fire of love to burn it up as an evening sacrifice to God. Delay not, but be like Christ both priest and victim, in an odor of sweetness to God and to men.

Now, that you may fully understand the drift of all my argument, I appeal to your wise judgment in few words with what is at once the counsel and desire of my soul. Undertake our observance as a man of great heart and noble deeds, for the sake of your eternal salvation. Become a recruit of Christ and stand guard in the camp of the heavenly army watchful with your sword on your thigh against the terrors of the night.

Here, then, I urge you to an enterprise that is good to undertake, easy to carry out and happy in its consummation. Let prayers be said, I beg you, that in carrying out so worthy a business you may exert yourself in proportion to the grace that will smile on you in God's favor. As to where or when you must do this thing, I leave it to the choice of your own prudence. But to delay or to hesitate will not, as I believe, serve your turn.

I will proceed no further with this, for fear that rough and uncouth lines might offend you, a man of palaces and courts.

An end and a measure then to this letter, but never an end to my affection of love for you.