In the Wilderness

By **Thomas Merton**

In his May 30, 1960 letter to Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr,[1] Thomas Merton detailed the evolution of his important article "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude."[2] He noted that his various rewritings to satisfy the Cistercian censors "were further developments of an original version written in 1955 or earlier and published only in French and Italian" (*RJ* 236). In his article on the development of this text,[3] William H. Shannon identified the initial French-language publication as "Dans le Désert de Dieu," which appeared in 1955 in *Temoignages*, the journal of the French Benedictine community of La Pierre-Qui-Vire.[4] He noted that "No English version of this French text has been located" (85, n. 5) and that he had therefore retranslated the French back into English. This translation had appeared in the Spring 1993 issue of *The Merton Seasonal* as "In God's Desert."[5] In fact, however, Merton's original English text, now published for the first time, had survived unnoticed in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

Merton's first contact with the Benedictines of La Pierre-Qui-Vire came when they requested an article from him for their special issue of *Temoignages* celebrating the eight-hundredth anniversary of the death of St. Bernard. While he was unable to provide an original piece for them, they were able to put together an essay entitled "St. Bernard en l'Amerique,"[6] consisting mainly of excerpts from the French translation of *The Waters of Siloe*,[7] with a brief introduction newly written by Merton. This initiated a warm relationship that resulted most memorably in the production of the monastic picture book *Silence dans le Ciel*,[8] translated into English as *Silence in Heaven*,[9] which featured Merton's introductory essay "In Silentio."[10] It also led to the publication of the article "Dans le Désert de Dieu," which is first referred to in extant correspondence in an August 14, 1954 letter to Merton from *Temoignages* editor Dom Claude Jean Nesmy, in which he said he was waiting for the article that Merton had promised.[11] The text arrived soon afterward, for in his next letter, dated September 1, Dom Nesmy professes himself "enchanted by your article on the desert," which, "needless to say, I am going to publish."[12] On November 6, Dom Nesmy writes to Merton that the article has been translated into French and that this version has been sent to Dom Gabriel Sortais, the Cistercian Abbot General, to be approved for publication.[13]

In the meanwhile, the process of editing of Merton's forthcoming book *No Man Is an Island*[14] had been proceeding. On November 29, Merton's friend, Harcourt, Brace editor Robert Giroux, wrote to him about the new work: "The chapter entitled 'In the Wilderness' is missing. Did you delete it, pages 206-211? The manuscript now jumps from 205 to 212 . . . . The transition is fine, but since you made no mention of the deletion and the old chapter still appears in the Contents, I thought I'd better mention it. We are proceeding on the assumption that the chapter stays out."[15] Merton replied on December 5:

> Yes, the chapter "In the Wilderness" is definitely missing. The censors of the Order went up in flames over it because I said it was better to be a hermit than a cenobite. So I took it out, and sent it to some Benedictines who loved it and are now planning (with the hopes of permission from French censors???) to print it in a magazine of theirs. I was happy that they understood the ideas in it so well,

> and said such good things about them in their letter. These are the monks of La Pierre qui Vire.[16]

So the article turns out to be an excised chapter originally intended for *No Man Is an Island*. On December 28, Dom Nesmy writes to Merton that he has heard back from Dom Gabriel, who was not completely pleased with the piece, and would allow its publication only if specified changes were made – in particular the removal of certain remarks on cheese-making![17] Merton accepted the revisions demanded, and the article duly appeared in the March 1955 issue of *Temoignages*.

With the details provided by Robert Giroux's November 1954 letter to Merton, it was possible to check the archives of the Thomas Merton Center to see if the chapter entitled "In the Wilderness" was still included in any earlier version of the *No Man Is an Island* text. In the typescript of a text still called "Viewpoints," the working title for what was to become *No Man Is an Island*,[18] chapter XVI, found on pages 206 to 211, is indeed the hitherto unrecognized original English version of "Dans le Désert de Dieu," the nucleus of "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude." It is now made available to readers in this centenary year of Merton's birth. Thanks are due to Paul M. Pearson, Director of the Bellarmine Merton Center, who located the chapter in question in the "Viewpoints" typescript, and to the members of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust, Anne McCormick, Peggy Fox and Mary Somerville, for permission to publish "In the Wilderness" in this issue of *The Merton Seasonal*.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 235-37; subsequent references will be cited as "*RJ*" parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 163-93.
3. William H. Shannon, "Reflections on Thomas Merton's Article 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude,'" *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 29.1 (1994) 83-99.
4. Thomas Merton, "Dans le Désert de Dieu," *Temoignages* 48 (March 1955) 132-36; the Italian version, entitled "Nel Deserto," appeared in *Camaldoli* 9.40 (Jan.-March 1955) 1-5.
5. Thomas Merton, "In God's Desert," trans. William H. Shannon, *The Merton Seasonal* 18.2 (Spring 1993) 4-6.
6. Thomas Merton, "Saint Bernard et l'Amerique," *Temoignages* 38-39 (July 1953) 88-98.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949); Thomas Merton, *Aux Sources du Silence*, trans. Jean Stiénon du Pré (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1952).
8. *Silence dans le Ciel*, texts et illustrations choisis et mis en page par les moines de la Pierre-qui-Vire (Paris: Éditions Arthaud, 1955).
9. *Silence in Heaven: A Book of the Monastic Life* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1956 / New York: Studio Publications, 1956).
10. The French translation is found on pages 12-18 of *Silence dans le Ciel*, the English original on pages 17-30 of *Silence in Heaven*. A revised and abridged version of the essay is included in Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965) 204-15.
11. Unpublished letter, Thomas Merton Center [TMC] archives.
12. "votre article sur le désert . . . m'enchante. . . . Inutile par consequent de vous dire que je vais publier votre article" (unpublished letter, TMC archives).
13. Unpublished letter, TMC archives.
14. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).
15. Unpublished letter, TMC archives (this material will appear in a volume of the Merton-Giroux correspondence edited by Patrick Samway, SJ, to be published by the University of Notre Dame Press later in 2015).
16. Unpublished letter, TMC archives.
17. Unpublished letter, TMC archives.
18. The typescript was prepared by Mrs. Ann Skakel, who with her husband George was a major benefactor of the Abbey of Gethsemani. Mrs. Skakel (mother of Ethel Kennedy) had also typed, or arranged to have typed, a number of other early Merton works prior to her death in a plane crash in 1955; for the Skakels' connections with the Abbey of Gethsemani and with Merton, see Thomas Spencer, "Merton and the Kennedys," *The Merton Seasonal* 37.1 (Spring 2012) 3-9.

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XVI. IN THE WILDERNESS

If a solitary finds himself a wilderness where he is unknown, and if he is allowed to remain there and to remain unknown, he still does more good for the human race by being a solitary than he would be able to do if he remained the prisoner of his society.

It is true that physical solitude sometimes seems to be a terrible dead end. Physical solitude is an earthly paradise only in the imagination of those who find their solitude in town or who can only be hermits for a few days or a few hours at a time. The vocation to perfect solitude is a vocation to suffering and darkness and poverty and frustration: but when a man is called to all these, he would rather have them than any earthly paradise.

The solitary who no longer communicates normally with the rest of men, except in the bare essentials of his life is a man who has a peculiar and difficult vocation. He soon loses all sense of his importance to the rest of the world, and yet he has a great importance. The hermit belongs most of all in a world like ours, that has degraded the human person and has lost all respect for solitude. But in such a world the hermit's vocation is more terrible than ever. Among us, the hermit is and can be nothing but a failure. We have no place for him (except in vaguest dreams). We have no patience with his reality. He is too insignificant, too frustrated, too dirty, and too poor. Even those who consider themselves contemplatives have a secret contempt for hermits. The eremitical life is nowhere more despised than in a Trappist monastery, where it ought to be perfectly understood, and it is strangely significant that Trappists are even more convinced than the rest of the practical world that hermits are impractical fools.

It is very dangerous for a monk to look down upon the hermit who is always his father and always his true model. The monastery must always have its doors closed to the world and its windows open to the desert. The monk should be one who fully realizes that life in the desert is not practical and that it is not supposed to be practical. Practicality enters the monastic life only as a concession to human weakness, and never forms part of the monastic ideal.

It has never been practical to leave all things and follow Christ. But it is supernaturally prudent. Practicality and supernatural prudence are opposed to one another as the wisdom of the flesh and the wisdom of the spirit. Practicality tends to sink roots in this present life and prudence lives for the world to come. Practicality is content with temporal values and temporal ends. Prudence weighs all things in the balance of eternity. In the scale of practicality, invisible and intangible values weight [*sic*] nothing. A life of solitude does not even tip the empty scale. But St. Paul says: "The foolish things of this world hath God chosen that He might confound the wise; and the weak things of the world hath God chosen that He may confound the strong. And the base things of the world and the things that are contemptible hath God chosen, and the things that are not, that He might bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in His sight" (I Corinthians 1:27-29).

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It is right that monks should farm, and make cheese, and fabricate liqueurs and support themselves by selling the things they produce. They are supposed to be able to do all these things without becoming business men. Practicality enters their life quite rightly as a servant of supernatural

prudence. But when practicality destroys monastic poverty it subverts the action of prudence, and gives the monk roots in this world instead of setting him free to journey toward eternity. The hermit remains to prove, by his impracticality and by the apparent fruitlessness of his vocation, that monks really mean little or nothing to this world. They have died to it, as it has died to them, and they remain in it only as pilgrims and exiles and witnesses of another Kingdom.

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I know men who will probably never forgive me for saying this: but it seems to me that hermits have more of a function in our society than Trappists precisely because they have less of a place in it. The Trappist is not enough of an exile. He can be appreciated and understood. After all, there are plenty of men in the world who, though they do not understand prayer, like cheese. And those who rise above the level of cheese still appreciate the Trappists for their "spiritual" results. Once the monastery is compared to a "dynamo of prayer" the world may be prepared to offer it at least a grudging respect. A dynamo produces something. And the energy of all these monks also, it seems, produces something. At least they claim to be self-supporting. Perhaps also they are spiritually supporting the world! But the hermit produces nothing. Not even cheese.

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The final and most cogent reason for which the hermit is criticized is that he is often poorer than the monk *even in his life of prayer*. He is weaker, his life is more precarious, he has more worries, he has to take care of himself and often does not succeed in doing so. His poverty rapidly becomes spiritual and invades his soul as well as his body so that in the end he has nothing but the insecurity, the hardship, the intellectual and spiritual indigence of the really poor. That is precisely the vocation of the hermit – the vocation to be underprivileged in every possible sense, even spiritually. No wonder such a vocation bears with it the stigma of being slightly crazy.

If being a hermit meant being a hero, we could still respect the vocation. But if it simply means being a bum . . . Even then, there are some who will accept the idea of being a bum because they can still weave into it some thought of contemplation, some fantasy about preaching to the birds.

In the end, your hermit may well prove to be not even a contemplative in any colorful sense of the term. His solitary life will, and must, be a life of prayer if he is to be a true hermit. But what prayer! Nothing is closer to bread and water than the hermit's interior prayer. He is reduced to dependence on the simplest forms of vocal prayer. His meditation is desperately poor. He suffers constant aridity. There are times when he cannot even think, except to think that he is probably going crazy. But underneath all this is the deep wealth of his uninterrupted solitude. This is all he has, and it is everything, for it contains God, and surrounds him at all times with God. His is a poverty so great that he no longer has the consolation of seeing God at a distance. He is never far enough away from God to see Him in perspective. He is swallowed up in Him, and therefore seldom sees Him at all.

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All that has been said about the indigence of the true hermit must not make us forget the fact that he is happy in his solitude and that its very poverty is what makes it a source of happiness. Not

that he loves poverty for its own sake, or solitude for its own sake: but he is supremely happy to be removed and impoverished and held in isolation by the will of God. His loneliness is sometimes frightful, but it is valuable to him beyond all price because it is saturated in the will of God. He could not leave that will if he tried. To be held prisoner in it is to be free, and almost to be in heaven. And so the life of physical solitude is a life of love without consolation, a life that is fruitful because it is willed by God and whatever is willed by God is immensely significant, above all when it appears to have no meaning.

The hermit remains in the world as an unheeded prophet, as a voice crying in the wilderness and as a sign of contradiction. The world refuses him because he has nothing that is its own. And his mission is to be refused by the world which, in rejecting him, and his poverty, and his loneliness, proclaims its fear of the loneliness of God.

But fear is always close to love, and even those who fear the solitary nevertheless become fascinated by him, because his very uselessness continues to proclaim that he might after all have some incomprehensible function.

His function is to be in the midst of the world as lonely and as poor and as unacceptable as God Himself in the souls of so many men. And he is there to tell them, in a way they cannot understand, that if they only knew how to prize their own loneliness, they would immediately find their God and would, for the first time in their lives, discover that they are persons.

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The usual argument of religious men who protest against exterior solitude is that it is both dangerous and unnecessary. The important thing, they say, is interior solitude. This can be had without physical isolation.

This statement can be more terribly true than they imagine. There are contemplatives who begin to seek and to find solitude while living in community. And their solitude is comforting. It is secure. But if it is secure, it is not solitude. If it cease to be secure, they want to leave it for something else. This is the point where the ghastly irony of interior solitude begins.

For when you are called to be a solitary, the Lord will make you a solitary, wherever you may be. Even though you may be surrounded by the support and comfort of your brethren, gradually the things that tie you to them are cut, one by one, by an invisible hand. You become like a ship that has slipped her moorings and is slipping away into the harbor in the middle of the night and you cannot get back to land.

Under such circumstances it is a great relief to be put back in communication with others by some work, some function of the ministry. You realize that you can no longer completely close the gap that has opened up between you and other men. And you realize, too, that you love them more than ever before. Humbled by your solitude, grateful for the work that relieves your poverty by bringing you back into communication with other men, you still remain in solitude. There is no greater solitude than that of an instrument of God who knows that even his words and his ministry can do nothing to alter the fact of his isolation.