
The Advantages of Community compared to the Solitary Life¹

The dangers of the solitary life

The solitary life is fraught with [many] other perils. The first and greatest is that of self-satisfaction. Since the solitary has no one to appraise his conduct, he will think he has achieved the perfection of the precept. Secondly, because he never tests his state of soul by exercise, he will not recognise his own deficiencies nor will he discover the advance he may have made in his manner of acting, since he will have removed all practical occasion for the observance of the commandments.

How will he show his humility, if there is no one with whom he may compare and so confirm his own greater humility? How will he give evidence of his compassion, if he has cut himself off from association with other persons? And how will he exercise himself in long-suffering, if no one contradicts his wishes? If anyone says that the teaching of the Holy Scripture is sufficient for the amendment of his ways, he resembles a man who learns carpentry without ever actually doing a carpenter's work or a man who is instructed in metal-working but will not reduce theory to practice. To such a one the Apostle [Paul] would say: 'Not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the justified.'²

Consider, further, that the Lord by reason of His excessive love for man was not content with merely teaching the word, but, so as to transmit to us clearly and exactly the example of humility in the perfection of charity, girded Himself and washed the feet of the disciples.³ Whom, therefore, will you wash? To whom will you minister? In comparison with whom will you be the lowest, if you live alone? How, moreover, in a solitude, will that good and pleasant thing be accomplished, the dwelling of brethren together in one habitation which the Holy Spirit likens to ointment emitting its fragrance from the head of the high priest?⁴ So it is an arena for the combat, a good path of progress, continual discipline, and a practicing of the Lord's commandments, when brethren dwell together in community.

In Community, each supplies the needs of the others

I consider that life passed in company with a number of persons in the same habitation is more advantageous in many respects. My reasons are, first, that no one of us is self-sufficient as regards corporeal necessities, but we require one another's aid in supplying our needs. The foot, to cite an analogy, possesses one kind of power and lacks another, and without the co-operation of the other members of the body it finds itself incapable of carrying on its activity independently for any length of time, nor does it have wherewithal to supply what is lacking.

¹ All extracts in this section are from *The Long Rules*, 7 (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, pp.248-252), except where indicated.

² Rom. 2:13

³ John 13:5

⁴ Ps. 132:1-2

Love is not self-seeking

Again, apart from this consideration, the doctrine of the charity of Christ does not permit the individual to be concerned solely with his own private interests. 'Charity,' says the Apostle, 'seeketh not her own.'⁵ But a life passed in solitude is concerned only with the private service of individual needs. This is openly opposed to the law of love which the Apostle [Paul] fulfilled, who sought not what was profitable to himself but to many that they might be saved.⁶

Community life is good for correction

Furthermore, a person living in solitary retirement will not readily discern his own defects, since he has no one to admonish and correct him with mildness and compassion. In fact, admonition even from an enemy often produces in a prudent man the desire for amendment.

The multi-tasking love of Community

Moreover, the majority of the commandments are easily observed by several persons living together, but not so in the case of one living alone; for, while he is obeying one commandment, the practice of another is being interfered with. For example, when he is visiting the sick, he cannot show hospitality to the stranger and, in the imparting and sharing of necessities (especially when the ministrations are prolonged), he is prevented from giving zealous attention to [other] tasks.

The ascetic life is for both male and female alike

But our discourse is not addressed to men only; for members of the female sex are not rejected because of physical weakness, but, chosen for the army of Christ by reason of their virility of spirit, they also battle on the side of Christ and fight no less valiantly than men. Some even win a greater renown. Of the number of these are they who compose the virgin throng. Of these are they who are pre-eminent in the combat for the confession of the faith and in the triumphs of martyrdom. Indeed, women as well as men followed after the Lord during His life on earth and both sexes ministered to our Saviour.⁷

⁵ 1 Cor. 13:5

⁶ 1 Cor. 10:33

⁷ *An Introduction to the Ascetical Life* (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, p.12)

In Community, a private grace becomes a common possession

In addition, since no one has the capacity to receive all spiritual gifts, but the grace of the Spirit is given proportionately to the faith of each,⁸ when one is living in association with others, the grace privately bestowed on each individual becomes the common possession of his fellows. 'To one, indeed, is given the word of wisdom; and to another, the word of knowledge; to another, faith, to another, prophecy, to another, the grace of healing,'⁹ and so on. He who receives any of these gifts does not possess it for his own sake but rather for the sake of others, so that, in the life passed in community, the operation of the Holy Spirit in the individual is at the same time necessarily transmitted to all. He who lives alone, consequently, and has, perhaps, one gift renders it ineffectual by leaving it in disuse, since it lies buried within him.

Female ascetics should outdo men

Since there are convents not only for men but for women who also profess virginity, all that has been said applies to both sexes alike. It is necessary to keep one thing in mind, however: This way of life demands on the part of women a greater and a more signal decorum in the observance of poverty, silence, obedience, and fraternal charity, a greater strictness with regard to going about in public, more caution in the matter of acquaintances, greater care in preserving mutual affection and avoiding factional groups; for in all these respects the lives of women who profess virginity should exhibit a more excellent zeal.¹⁰

The harmony of Community

Besides, if all we who are united in the one hope of our calling¹¹ are one body with Christ as our Head, we are also members, one of another.¹² If we are not joined together by union in the Holy Spirit in the harmony of one body, but each of us should choose to live in solitude, we would not serve the common good in the ministry according to God's good pleasure, but would be satisfying our own passion for self-gratification. How could we, divided and separated, preserve the status and the mutual service of members or our subordinate relationship to our Head which is Christ? It is impossible, indeed, to rejoice with him who receives an honour or to sympathise with him who suffers¹³ when, by reason of their being separated from one another, each person cannot, in all likelihood, be kept informed about the affairs of his neighbour.

⁸ Rom. 12:6

⁹ 1 Cor. 12:8,9

¹⁰ *An Ascetical Discourse* (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, p.221)

¹¹ Eph. 4:4

¹² 1 Cor. 12:12

¹³ 1 Cor. 12:26