

HUMILITY-AN ANTIDOTE TO LONELINESS

If egotism and pride foster this kind of loneliness, then true humility — even though the term is misused and loses meaning among those who merely talk about it — produces the climate in which this loneliness is not permitted to thrive. Behold how the desert — that good mother, excellent philosopher and theologian — speaks about holy humility, silence and peace.

The humble person, according to Abba Poimen, is comfortable and at peace wherever he may find himself.

Abba Isaac tells us that he who makes himself small in everything will be exalted above all. And his discerning voice continues: “Hate honor and you will be honored indeed. He who runs after honors causes honor itself to be banished from him. But if you merely disdain yourself hypocritically in order to appear humble, God will reveal you. In the *Gerontikon*, which contains a wide variety of spiritual writings from the Fathers, it is repeatedly made clear that “the humble-minded and lowly in heart is not the one who cheapens himself and talks about humility, but the one who endures joyfully the dishonors which come from his neighbor.” In another place the *Gerontikon* states that “the person honored more than he deserves is actually harmed, while the person who is not honored at all by his fellow human beings will be honored in heaven by God.”

Abba Poimen gives us this advice: “Every possible sorrow that comes to you can be overcome with silence.”

Abba Isaiah agrees with him: “Until your heart is at peace through prayer, make no effort to explain anything to your brother.”

In studying the writings of the holy fathers of the desert, one can easily observe a common mind, a common noble spirit, humanness, an understanding, and wisdom. These are dew drops of the Holy Spirit, which fall in the arid desert after long struggles, which make fragrant flowers grow among the communities of faithful committed totally to God, and which make fragrant the souls of those who truly thirst for God.

Abba Isaiah, that great mind, notes with particular grace and subtlety: “He who humbles himself before God is capable of enduring every insult. The humble person is not concerned about what others say about him. The person who bears the harsh word of a rude and foolish man for the sake of God is worthy of acquiring peace.”

Abba Mark, on this important topic — our relationship with ourselves and with others, in which we find ourselves stumbling on a daily basis — goes on to note the following: “When you become aware of the thought in your mind dictating human glory, you should know for sure that this thought is preparing you for shame. And if you discern someone praising you hypocritically, expect also his accusation some time soon.” And with the daring precision of a surgeon of the soul, the holy Abba continues: “When you see someone crying over the many insults he has received, you should know that, because he was overcome by vainglory, he is now unknowingly reaping the crop of evils in his heart. He who loves pleasure is grieved by accusations and abuse. On the other hand, he who loves God is grieved by praises and other superfluous remarks. The degree of our humility is measured by slander. Don’t think that you have humility when you cannot forbear even the slightest accusation.”

Abba Zossima goes even further: “Remember the one who has ridiculed you, who has grieved you, who has wronged you, who has done evil to you, as your physician, your healer. Christ sent him to heal you; don’t remember him with anger.”

Evagrius considered those who spoke badly of him as benefactors.

The divine wisdom of these physicians of the desert has tremendous significance to our topic. It has been said that these remarks are addressed by monks and for monks, but this is a superficial view. The epidemic of loneliness and depression that we are discussing results from proud minds lacking in humility, from failed interpersonal relationships, from unsatisfied *egotistical aspirations*, from *self-aggrandizement*, praise-seeking and self-love. This loneliness is strong enough to weaken a person and to make him sick. But love is stronger, capable of healing and regenerating the whole world.

Man has an irrepressible need to communicate, but communication must be properly developed. Initially, we must strike up a conversation — a sincere, honorable and courageous conversation — with our unknown self. We must rediscover in the very depths of our soul the hidden innocence of our childhood years. Next we must learn to have unmasked face-to-face conversation with the only, true living friend — our heavenly Father and God. Only then will we be able to effectively communicate with others, whoever they are — the worst, the best, the neighbors, the distant, our brothers and sisters in Christ. In this manner the webs of loneliness are removed, the inaccessible and sunless dungeons of the heart are illumined, the shell of our ego is broken. When we have rejected the loneliness of miserable, self-centered egotism we can begin to rejoice, to be free, to breathe, to live.

NATURAL LONELINESS: A SANCTUARY OF KNOWLEDGE — OF SELF AND OF GOD

There is another type of loneliness — natural loneliness — which is not pathological but creative, life-giving, full of grace. It is exemplified by the natural separation of monastics from the world. It is a loneliness to which we all should devote much time. We must be able to withdraw ourselves from the noisy crowds, which are so superficial, so distracting, and so counterproductive — in a withdrawal which is healthy, beautiful and good. It is important that we learn to shut off the constant communication with the many, which does not allow us to be alone with our self — and as a consequence, we are not able to be with the One who is always waiting, the incarnate Logos and God. We must make the time and find the way for this other kind of sacred communication of natural loneliness. And we must pursue this knowledgeable, with an orderly, disciplined program.

Please keep in mind that we are not talking about those who seek to escape from preoccupations with the world in order to find rest, to view beautiful sunsets, to gaze at star-studded skies. Such activities are not spiritual. Neither are we talking about those who seek to meditate using techniques of doubtful origins to achieve dubious results. Nor are we discussing those who devote fleeting moments to superficial daydreams and who presume to have repented when they feel sentimental emotions as they remember indiscretions of their past. And we certainly are not talking about the well-meaning but naïve who think the spiritual life of sacred quietude consists of strolling at the sea shore with a *komboschoini* (prayer beads) in hand. Furthermore, we are not referring to the spiritual tourists who visit holy places and converse boldly with holy persons, but who do not deny their ego nor sacrifice their will. Activities such as these are only superficial attempts to escape from life, through shallow daydreaming and capricious imagination.

What we are talking about is sacred quietude — achieved with ascetic effort — which liberates us from the loneliness of the world, even though we find ourselves in a noisy city or a disorderly household. We are talking about the persistence and the patience which help us probe the deepest roots of our existence and understand its limits, and which dispel the darkness that tires and discourages us.

We need to learn to pray. We need vigils — constant vigilance in a posture of immobility and calmness. When I am near God what do I have to fear? He has guided me to where I may be guided by him. Despairing of friends and acquaintances — sorely disappointed with the arts, the technologies, and the ideologies — disenchanted with social chatter and vacuous etiquette — I come to the privilege of ultimate despair. I become aware that, in my nakedness, God himself is there to vest me with authentic hope. And in this miracle the blessed Panaghia and all the saints are present to lend their support.

In this natural loneliness — this divine loneliness — I find relief. The actor's masks, which I had felt obliged to put on — or which had been put on me — have been discarded. It had been a dreadful state. Every night I needed to go to another gathering, to be part of another group, for I had to be included

somewhere. I was constantly changing my mask. Now, however, by turning inward I begin to live, to become aware that I am a child of God, to unveil my unique and irreplaceable identity my face, my person. I begin to observe the activities of the passions. I can see my strengths and my limitations. I am redeemed from errors, fantasies, excesses, and languid apathy.

A firm resolve helps guide our steps to this lonely sanctuary of knowledge — of self and of God. In this sanctuary the loneliness — the *aloneness* — which had been feared becomes a delight. For the person who is with God can never be alone since he is in dialogue with himself and with God. Here we find ourselves with less individualism, and greater love for others. We find tears for the pain and suffering of our brothers and sisters, and strength for greater efforts that will help them. For the voice which arises from the depths of the lone person cuts through the clouds and reaches the Triune God, who always listens and always responds.