



Cima de Conegliano;
*Saint Jerome in
the Wilderness*
(c.1500/1505);

Courtesy National Gallery of Art,
Washington



THE PRAYER OF THE HEART

BY LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM, PH.D.

SOLITUDE AND COMMUNITY

The late philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said that religion is what one does with one's solitude. There is a certain truth in that observation in that one encounters God by a personal reaching out if the encounter is a genuine one. At the same time, however, the solitary experience of faith hardly sums up the totality of the life of faith. It is true, as the New Testament teaches us, that Jesus frequently sought out quiet places, often before dawn, to pray alone. However, that solitary prayer must be seen against Jesus' pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem, His visits to synagogues, His participation in prayer with His disciples, and the other observances incumbent upon a faithful Jew.

The well-worn cliché "I am spiritual but not religious" can be understood as a preference for *my* spirituality as opposed to membership in a religion. The cliché is a testament to the American tendency to prize the power of individuality. That dichotomy, however, from the Christian perspective, is an insufficient one overly dependent on notions of the autonomy of the individual.

Let us begin with stipulating that solitude is not an exact synonym for individuality. The poet Marianne Moore once said that the antidote to loneliness is solitude. That aphorism nicely states that solitude is that condition by which one knows who one is. The biblical term for the self is the heart. The heart is the deepest center of a person. The monk poet Thomas Merton called it by a term he declined to translate: *point vierge*. It is within the heart that one knows who one is and in that knowledge also finds the deep center in which one can truly turn in prayer to God.

The region of the heart is the most radical form of centering the ego where, according to Scripture, we intuit that we are made in the image and likeness of God. To evade that center is to create a false self or, as Scripture would have it, an unclean heart. The unclean heart stands in radical singularity; the clean heart, by contrast, inherits a promise: “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8).

In the sense described above, everyone must take responsibility for his or her heart. That task is a personal responsibility. However, the striking singularity of one’s heart never means that one, in that singularity, is disconnected from all who also bear within them the image and likeness of God. There is a community of hearts, each with its own identity, which the biblical tradition has attempted to name in a plethora of metaphors and images: the Mystical Body; the People of God; a chosen race; and so on.

We are thus faced with something like a paradox: we are called to responsibility for our own self but that self (i.e. that heart) is inextricably linked to others. Hence: there is solitude in community. The holy hermits, living alone far from the common run of humanity, always referred to their hermitages as an *ecclesiola*—a “little church.” In that simple description they affirmed that they lived alone as part of a community. The point was clearly made when Jesus, asked for instruction about how to pray, did not say to pray to *my* Father but instead to address God as *Our* Father. In his first encyclical, Pope Francis makes the point that the act of faith made by the individual is also an act bringing a person into community: “The individual’s act of faith finds its place within a community, within the common ‘we’ of the people who, in faith, are like a single person” (*Lumen Fidei*, §14).

Discussions about the relationship of the necessary solitude of the single person of faith and prayer and the larger community may seem a bit abstract until we consider the concrete pastoral implications of that relationship. Let us stipulate that we must take responsibility for our own person and our own heart, and let us further stipulate that in doing that we are sharers in the community which we will call the hidden (i.e. Mystical) Body of Christ. What follows from those stipulations?

FIRST

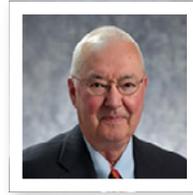
While we pray our solitary prayer we also, at the same time, pray with all those who can say “Our Father.” Our solitary prayer is always prayer in communion.

SECOND

To the degree that we are aware of the community of prayer, we become conscious that “my” prayer can never be divorced from the needs, aspirations, and desires from those who also say “Our Father.” In praying out of our own desire we tacitly join with the prayers of others—we “build up” the community. I have always been struck by something that the great Teresa of Ávila once wrote. She asked how a person might know if their highest form of contemplative prayer was valid. Her answer was simple: that prayer is valid if a person loved her sisters more. Prayer, in that instance, always flows outward beyond the needs of the one to the building up of the other.

THIRD

To grasp the relation between one’s heart or one’s solitude and community helps us to see how to participate in the public worship of the liturgy more intentionally. To do so requires some attempt at recollection about what one is about to do (worship) and then participate with the gathered community in unity. It is only when that relationship comes into our consciousness at some level does the invitation “Let us pray” become more than a well-worn phrase which we hear only passively. To acknowledge that reality helps in some fashion to blur the distinction between private and communal prayer.



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