



## **Absence, Familiarity and Monasticism**

*by Rev. James Heft*

So many uncertainties for such a long time. Three things, however, have proven constants: absence, familiarity, and solitude. We all have become monks, a condition imposed on us, welcomed by some, but difficult for many.

Being in a “lockdown” situation, many of us have reached out more to others, to see how they are doing, to give them our love and support, and to lessen our own feeling of isolation. Our hearts have grown fonder—we really value the human contact, virtual though it has to be. C. S. Lewis once wrote that the world is starved for solitude and friendship. If you cannot enter peacefully into solitude, you cling to friendships. You need them more than you give to them. But for some of us in lockdown with others, familiarity can bring to the surface quarrels and discord, even divisions. I read recently that once the restrictions in Wuhan were lifted, the divorce rate shot up.

Probably many of us are able to cope well. We have homes and apartments to live in. Most of us can work from home and secure the food our families need. But the homeless, the destitute, the elderly in nursing homes and many who have the virus suffer in isolation. The retirement centers for members of religious orders, mine included, are locked down. I would love to visit those men now, more than ever. Some of them have been mentors and all of them an inspiration.

For us here in our small community, during the lockdown we have spent more time in solitude, despite frequent evenings together with Netflix.

Solitude is not loneliness. Those of us who have experienced the lockdown know from it one of the most important characteristics of the monastic life: the practice of silence. A Russian mystic wrote, “Silence is the cross on which man must crucify his ego.” When in Kenya last December, I heard about the father of a large family who spoke only on Fridays. During the rest of the week, he tended his sheep. On Fridays, he spoke to his family. Others came from a distance to talk with him, including priests and monks. My favorite atheist, Frederick Nietzsche wrote, “Loneliness does not torture; it matures.” I would substitute the word solitude for loneliness. Silence matures. If people come to us then, it is more likely that we will have something worthwhile to say to them.

All the great religions place silence in the entranceway to their authentic practice. One need not welcome solitude for religious reasons. Henry David Thoreau moved to Walden Pond

in 1845. He wrote, "I went to the woods because I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Those who do enter silence for religious reasons mysteriously bless us all.

As the uncertainty continues, may our hearts grow fonder of others who are distant, our solitude deepen our friendships with them, and in our imposed monasticism we once again set aside the time to think a little more deeply about "the essential facts of life."