

Waiting in the Tabernacle of the Hermitage

Sister Rachel

I am a canonical hermit, originally of the diocese of Nottingham UK, professed 2006, currently of the diocese of Hallam UK. Hermits are eclectic and catholic in nature – we each do our own thing! I write from my own experience of hermitage, though I hope there may be common themes here which will resonate more widely.

As we draw towards the end of this Year-of-Covid, I have been curious to notice the priorities of the Church in supporting her members and the wider populace. Within local parish communities there has been much evidence of ongoing support for each other and for the most needy, finding innovative ways to celebrate and to support. But the ecclesial headlines appear to have focused quite specifically on the re-opening of church buildings for private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, and thence for the physical participation of the faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist.

When I was consecrated as a canonical hermit, I was offered the privilege of having the Blessed Sacrament reserved within my hermitage. I gave the invitation much prayerful consideration, but eventually decided against it. My understanding and experience of hermitage is that the whole of the hermitage is sacred space; the whole of the hermitage is tabernacle, the place where the hermit meets Christ. Hermitage is, for the hermit, the sacred space of God-with-us. This understanding and experience is a step beyond the foothills of the God-is-everywhere theme of childhood lessons. This is the confidence that, by God's grace, simply to embrace and live out my humanity in the place and circumstance I find myself, is the fullest possible expression of my relationship with God during my life on this earth.

Deep within the paragraphs of Vita Consecrata (an encyclical on the consecrated life which is adopted by canonical hermits on their profession) there is hidden a quite audacious phrase. It describes Jesus' life on earth, his humanity, as 'the expression of his relationship as the

Only-Begotten Son with the Father and with the Holy Spirit'.¹ Christ chose being human as the best way of participating in the love of the Trinity. In expressing the love of the Trinitarian Godhead, in the Word being spoken, Christ 'created' the state of being human. The Word was made flesh.

Being human is 'the expression' of Christ's love within the Trinity.

We have been taught, perhaps too often, that the humanity of Jesus was a belittling, a humbling of his deity. As a hermit I want to bear witness to the belief that the call to being human in Christ, and in imitation of Jesus, makes manifest the fullness of my relationship, in Christ, in the Trinity. To be human is not to be diminished. Being human is not dragging Jesus downwards into our 'wretched state'. Quite the opposite – Christ is human first!

Being human is Christ creating us upwards into the ecstasy of the Trinity. Christ's undiminished humanity is the ecstatic love that we are invited to share in our living today. Each one of us is created in the image of Christ's humanity – in the image of the fullness of his expression of Trinitarian love. I witness that I am called to make manifest Trinitarian love, through my humanity-of-Christ in my daily life.

So how does that work in practice? The heartbeat of my hermitage is its sacred ordinariness. It is an experience, in silence and solitude, of total immersion in the humdrum of daily life. A hermit is one who has, perhaps, become so overwhelmed by the immensity of the privilege of sharing Jesus' humanity that she chooses to spend her whole life contemplating the mystery and manifestation of that gift in the most simple form of living. A hermit lives out the mystery of the Incarnation in her own body, her own blood. A hermit says, 'Christ, in the Incarnation, chose being Jesus, being human, as the best way of expressing the love of the Trinity. Living in Christ, *under the action of the Holy Spirit, and totally dedicated to God who is supremely loved,*² I will now do likewise.'

Because of the relentless ordinariness of her life, there is very little of worth that can be written about a hermit and her hermitage which cannot be written about every individual and community on the earth. That participation in the mystery of Christ's humanity in Jesus is the focused privilege of the hermitage, but it is the lodestone of every human

life. The hermit inhabits the tabernacle of her hermitage, but all people wait and attend in the tabernacle of the world. Christ is close to us when we are kneeling directly in front of the Blessed Sacrament in a church, but just as close when we are sitting in the pews at the back, or standing at the boundary wall outside locked doors, or at any moment in any place when we attend inwardly to the presence of God.

Lockdown in the hermitage was not a time of greater separation, but a time of dwelling deeper within the mystery. Now, as the churches tentatively regroup and are re-inhabited, as people kneel directly in front of the tabernacle, and celebrate Eucharist together in each other's company, we are able to express more publicly again the Community which is Christ's self-manifestation and revelation to the world. In this time of Advent, of waiting, of expectation, and from the solitude and silence of my hermitage, I like to stand with the Church, and the whole of humanity, bereaved, grieving, masked and socially distanced, together-yet-apart before the altar of God.

God is with us.

Notes

1. Pope John Paul II, 1996, *Vita Consecrata*. 18
2. Code of Canon Law: Part III Institutes of consecrated life. Canon 573 i

Sister Rachel Denton has lived as a canonical hermit of the Roman Catholic church since 2002. On November 18th 2006, in the presence of Bishop Malcolm McMahon of Nottingham, family, friends and parishioners, she made her solemn profession - vows to live as a hermit for the rest of her life.