

REVIEW: A Prayer of Franciscan Solitude

by André Cirino OFM and Josef Raischl OFS:

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According to a recent study by psychologists at the University of Virginia, many people would prefer to give themselves a mild electric shock than to sit down in a room alone with their own thoughts.¹ The fear of loneliness, the dread of isolation and the lack of companionship are so intense in our fast-paced, quick-clipped and complicated society that it is no wonder that Wikipedia can define solitude only in the darkest of terms: “Solitude is a state of seclusion or isolation, i.e., lack of contact with people. It may stem from bad relationships, loss of loved ones, deliberate choice, infectious disease, mental disorders, neurological disorders or circumstances of employment or situation (see castaway).”

It is a strange juxtaposition. We are bombarded with communication at all hours and in almost every place. Texts, tweets, instant messages, social media, and cell-phones push us out of ourselves night and day, exhausting our attention, draining our social and psychic energy. Yet, it is solitude that we fear and being alone that frightens us. It can be otherwise. Cirino and Raischl offer a prescription in their new book on solitude.

They remind us how Francis of Assisi found the *joy of solitude* and taught it to his sisters and brothers eight hundred years ago. He gave a few simple directions to his brothers who were spending time in prayer in places of solitude and silence. That one page document has been called “The Rules for Hermitages” by Kajetan Esser but it is notably rechristened in this work by Cirino and Raischl as “*The Document on Solitude*.” As Cirino explains well in his introduction, “hermitage” suggests a structure rather than an experience and “rule” proposes “limits” rather than “adaptations” that may be needed from time to time and place to place.

What Cirino and Raischl offer in this work is an engaging pathway to the experience of Franciscan solitude, a series of reflections by various authors on the experience of a *solitude in fraternity* that allows the mind and heart to deepen their connection to all that is good. Far from being the terrifying isolation that people fear today, Cirino and Raischl demonstrate how Franciscan solitude provides clarity, awareness, insight and connection to oneself, creation, and God. Frances Teresa

Downing relates what a contemporary said of Clare of Assisi’s return from private prayer – “When she returned from prayer, her face appeared clearer and more beautiful than the sun. Her words sent forth an indescribable sweetness so her life seemed totally heavenly.”

Cirino and Raischl have collected the experiences of a diverse group of women and men and allowed them to share their stories of solitude. Each rooted in the directions that Francis gave long ago, these articles are testimonies and teachings on how to develop an “attentive silence” in order to experience a “deliberate life.” The authors demonstrate a fine ability to reveal the roots of their experience in the Franciscan intellectual tradition by deftly showing the initial genius of Francis’ *Document on Solitude*, Clare’s use and adaptation of it, and the means that Franciscans today, lay and religious, use to discover their roots and strength in relational goodness.

Nietzsche once described his need for solitude:

*I go into solitude so as not to drink out of everybody’s cistern. When I am among the many I live as the many do, and I do not think I really think. After a time it always seems as if they want to banish my self from myself and rob me of my soul.*²

Cirino and Raischl have provided a primer on Franciscan contemplative mindfulness, by making the experience of Franciscan solitude understandable and achievable even in the midst of busy lives and complicated obligations. By allowing authors to befriend us with stories of how they have adapted Francis’ simple directions on finding spaces for an attentive silence, Cirino and Raischl take the fear out of the prospect of solitude. And they demonstrate how the anxiety of *doing* can be transformed into the elegant allure of *being* for “those who wish to *be* in a religious manner in solitude.” (*Document on Solitude*, 1). This is a must-read for anyone wishing to reconnect to their relational goodness in God!

André Cirino and Josef Raischl, *Prayer of Franciscan Solitude* (Phoenix, AZ: Tau Publishing, 2018).

¹ Timothy D. Wilson et al., “Just Think: The Challenge of a Disengaged Mind,” *Science* 345 (2014), 75-77.

² F. Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 491.