

Enclosure and Solitude of Heart or, Guarding One's Heart (Mother Gail Fitzpatrick)

The subject I have chosen for our reflection tonight may sound strange. Enclosure is clearly a matter for monasteries, but what can it have to do with lay people, men and women living full and busy lives in the world?

There are two reasons I chose this topic. One is that enclosure is a reality of our life as Cistercian monks and nuns, and today we are involved in study and discussion to discern how we are called to live that reality in an authentic way in the 21st century. So it is a current issue—one that will be discussed at our General Chapter.

The second reason comes from the experience of our Associates of the Iowa Cistercians. About two years ago the Associates asked us to speak about enclosure to help them understand what it was all about, and how they might better respect this aspect of our lives. So we did this, and we had a good discussion on the several different levels of enclosure. In the end we came to the question: Does this monastic practice of enclosure have any relevance in your lives as lay men and women?

A year later I learned that many of the Associates had taken to heart this monastic discipline and made significant changes in their lives in the spirit of enclosure and solitude of heart. I was touched by their serious response to this. Later, I would like to share with you some of their experiences. But now we might just look at what is enclosure for monks and nuns? What is its value or purpose? How does one live it?

I would say there are three levels or ways of understanding the word enclosure. One is material. If you see a sign on a fence or door "Enclosure", you know immediately that only those who belong to the monastic community belong inside that physical boundary. The "enclosure" is a particular space, clearly defined, into which only persons who are members may go and from which those members leave only for specific purposes.

A second way of understanding enclosure is juridic. We speak of "papal enclosure", "constitutional enclosure", and currently we Cistercians are speaking about "monastic enclosure". These designations refer to types of law. To be recognized by the Church as a monastic order, we must choose which form of enclosure is most appropriate for our particular way of life, and the Church must approve that choice. When that happens the community and members are then bound to live within that juridic framework. Our current discussion in the Order is basically on this level. It involves the nuns of the Order particularly, but also may touch the lives of the monks.

Then we come to the third level. What does this juridic and quite material practice have to do with life? How does it, or how is it supposed to, affect the spiritual life of monks and nuns? To quote Dom Ambrose Southy in his letter to the Order in 1985, "enclosure is not a monastic value. It is a material support to protect something which is a monastic value—solitude."

Another way of expressing this could be in terms of purity of heart. Cassian teaches that purity of heart is the goal of monastic life. I see the practice or discipline of enclosure as a way of guarding one's heart. To guard one's heart is to recognize that many things may be good in themselves, but they may not be conducive to growth in my heart of love, compassion, centeredness on Jesus Christ and the gift of oneself daily and hourly in prayer for the Kingdom. Many things are good, but to guard one's heart is to discern continually the call of God, the call of love, and to exclude from one's inner chamber the trivial, the curiosities, the animosities that destroy the reign of God's peace within.

In a recent document on enclosure a Cistercian nun writes: "The heart of the monastic purified by asceticism becomes the space where all the creation enters into the silence of God and the solitude of adoration. The real cloister or enclosure is the heart of one dedicated to undivided love of God, not the enclosed space of the cloister."

Dom Bernardo, in his communication at the Synod of Bishops on the theme of religious life, said: Solitude of heart and concentration of all our strength on the search for God require an *interior solitude* made stronger by exterior solitude.

When we spoke about material enclosure we mentioned that the signs of enclosure are like a door that can both allow and prevent entrance and allow or prevent exits. It has a dual function. So we might want to ask the question : what is it that enclosure excludes from the monastery? St. Bernard in the 12th Century made a list that still rings true. He wrote: "You enjoy the solitude if you refuse to share in the common gossip, if you shun involvement in the problems of the moment and set no store by the fancies of the masses, if you reject what everybody covets, avoid disputes, make light of losses, and pay no heed to injuries." (S of S. 40:4-5)

I would add to Bernard's list a few of our 21st century beasts to which we would like to bar entrance: the cultural "isms", i.e. consumerism, materialism, secularism, the idols of the world of entertainment and sports, and the glut of information. There is always the fine line of discernment between what is necessary to know "to carry the burdens and sufferings of our world in prayer" and what is too much...what is idle curiosity. I would also add to the discernment this question: what is needed and legitimate enjoyment and relaxation. You can surely add to the list from your own experience. The point of the discernment is: what feeds the spirit? What fosters purity of heart?

Now we have used the analogy of the door that prevents entrance as the sign that indicates a boundary. I would like to speak briefly about the experience on the inside of the door or "enclosure" sign. I entered Cistercian life way back in 1956. In all these years I have seen the other side of the door or enclosure signs a lot "daily. I have never experienced it as a barrier or something imprisoning. I have felt, in fact, a deep union with people, esp. those who are suffering. I know monastics who have experienced a call to very deep union in Christ with people suffering in various ways. One nun I know experiences great compassion for women -

especially in our contemporary world - and prays with tears for those who bear the burden of violence. It seems true to say that as experiences and involvements are curtailed - cut down - one goes deeper. This is not a phenomenon of monastics only, but it is part of the lived effects of greater solitude and conscious guarding of one's heart.

A certain distance is necessary to bear the light of God's Presence and the darkness of one's own and the other's shadow or evil and to respond in depth. The distance or space may be physical as for most monks and nuns. For you the distance may be more virtual. That is your challenge as Lay Cistercians.

The essence of enclosure is the guarding of one's heart. The purpose of guarding one's heart is total availability for God and for the work of conversion, compassion and contemplation that God calls us to as Cistercians'vowed or lay.

I'd like to say a word about this trilogy. **Conversion**'**Compassion**'**Contemplation**'these are the bed rock of Cistercian spirituality. Saint Bernard speaks of these in terms of three degrees of truth. (*The Steps of Pride and Humility*.) The first degree of truth is self knowledge. That radical knowing of oneself that is without subterfuge. I recognize in myself the image of God'a beloved and graced child of God. I also recognize in myself the defacement of that image through my own forgetfulness, selfishness, or whatever other way I place myself before God and others. This honest viewing of oneself is the beginning of conversion, the movement beyond myself.

As this grace of conversion works in me, I discover the second degree of truth, which is compassion. I come to know and understand others through the experience of my own weakness. One does not learn compassion through one's strength. We learn compassion through our weakness. And in this acceptance of one's own weakness and vulnerability, and that of our neighbor's, our hearts are purified and God reveals himself to us in various ways. We see God. This is contemplation. Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.

This is the work of Cistercians'the labor of conversion, the charity of compassion and the joy of contemplation. These are always working...we never have it all together...we are never finished! Saint Benedict writes: "the workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community."

So we come back to enclosure. I don't pretend to know how lay men and women might integrate this monastic practice into their lives. Some associates have mentioned various changes they have made in their life style, or just new insights that have come to them.

I would say these can be roughly grouped under three headings: a sacred place; the use of media; the reverence for persons.

1. Probably many of you have created in your homes a "place apart" for silence and prayer. This is not to separate one from family or friends, but just a place of focus, of

centeredness on God. For one married couple, their daily place of prayer was their car as they drove to work together each morning. Morning praise and quiet prayer set the tone of their day. For another, a fourth floor office became an "enclosure" because not many want to climb all those stairs! Sometimes reflection on solitude can enable one to appreciate the solitude that is already present in one's life. A person who lives alone told me that our discussion on enclosure helped her to recognize the value of her own "unplanned enclosure". She said, "It had no meaning before I came to think of it as a naturally monastic aspect of my life."

2. The use of media, TV, movies, newspapers is the area of clear need for boundaries for most. I know couples who have either eliminated TV entirely from their homes or drastically reduced their use of it. As one put it, "Now I am more watchful of what comes into my environment." Another expresses it in terms of the effect on her own inner life of the messages and perspectives TV promotes. It isn't so much a fear of picking up those values or lack of values, as it is a depression or anger about what the media is reflecting of the culture and world in which we live. These comments express to me an active and dedicated guarding of the heart.
3. Reverence for persons and prayerful and concrete openness to the needs of others is clearly a priority. A sense of balance and an ability to set boundaries is needed in lay life as it is in monastic life. Discernment is needed to recognize when an "interruption" is Christ in disguise, and when it is a challenge from which one would do better to remove oneself.

Another way of expressing this discernment is as a filtering process. One asks of every stimulus, every activity, every relationship in our lives, "how does this help my goal of living a spiritual life," of seeking God in all the events and activities of my life? This filtering is a process that many serious minded people use, especially in our culture with its overload of sensory stimulation; what is different is its goal.

Keeping things out is only one aspect of this filtering process; inviting in is another. Enclosure also means inviting into one's inner space those things and people who will further our goal of consciously living in God's presence and of finding our true selves in the process. So the meaning of enclosure widens to include community—a group of people who accept the need for filtering and who share the same goal.

The relationship of community to enclosure or solitude might be one you would want to explore. Finally, I would like to mention one aspect of solitude and reverence for the sacredness of the other that is unique to those who are married. Here I will quote at length since I cannot say it as well as the person who wrote this.

"I am trying to pay more attention to the sacramental nature of my marriage and the way it functions as a source of grace in my life. Part of being married means working hard to be totally open and accessible to one another—to hold nothing back; to have no secrets, to be willing to be vulnerable. But it also means not to make unreasonable demands, not to desire more than the other is able to give. In this sense enclosure is an important issue in my marriage and it

involves trying to honor and respect those parts of each other we have no right to intrude upon."

In conclusion, I want to thank all who have shared (with us) their experience of living the essence of enclosure which is solitude and guarding of one's heart in their lives. I also want to thank all of you who are listening to the Spirit of God in your lives. I believe that the charism of Cistercian spirituality is very adaptable, and that the Spirit will breathe this gift as God wills. We know that love is increased by spreading it around. I think the same is true of spirituality. It is enlivened and deepened as many seek to understand and integrate it into their lives.

What may begin as an attraction to a place, a particular monastery, can become a source of new life and great fruitfulness for the kingdom. It calls us monastics to greater authenticity. We are humbled and spurred on by your searching.

Let us end with St Benedict's own prayer: May he bring us all together to everlasting life.

Mother Gail Fitzpatrick
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