

THE SOLITARY LIFE

A Letter of Guigo **5th Prior of the Grande Chartreuse**

INTRODUCED AND TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN
BY THOMAS MERTON



MONASTERY CEMETERY CROSS

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THE SOLITARY LIFE

*A Letter of Guigo,
5th Prior of the Grande Chartreuse.
Written about 1135,
in the last days of his priorate,
to an unknown friend.*

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INTRODUCTION

Guigo is one of those extraordinary figures in literature and in spirituality who, unknown and perhaps in some sense inaccessible to the many, have been accorded the most unqualified admiration by the discerning few. Thirty years ago Dom Wilmart, editing Guigo's *Meditations*, did not hesitate to say that he considered this little book "the most original work that has come down to us from the truly creative period of the middle ages." No small praise when we reflect who Guigo's contemporaries were! Dom Wilmart names a few: not only Hildebert, William de Conches, Bernard of Chartres, Honorius "of Autun", Gilbert de la Porrée, but even Abelard, Hugh of St. Victor and St. Bernard himself. The opinion is neither rash nor even new. The very ones Wilmart names were among the first to praise Guigo without reservation. Peter the Venerable called him "the fairest flower of our religion." We know what effect the *Meditations* of Guigo had on Bernard of Clairvaux (see St. Bernard, Letter XI). Some of the most fundamental ideas in Bernard's own doctrine of love were in-

spired by his Carthusian friend. Wilmart compares Guigo, without exaggeration, to Pascal. (1) We find in the *Meditations* the same psychological finesse as in the *Pensées*, the same metaphysical solidity, the same religious depth. But we also find in the twelfth century Carthusian a rocklike wholeness and coherence, untroubled by the anxieties and ambivalences that stirred the solitary of the convent of Port Royal. The difference is doubtless to be sought not only in the characters of the two and in their lives, but also in their times.

Fifth Prior of the Grande Chartreuse, Guigo was born in 1083 in Dauphiné. (2) He entered the Chartreuse at the age of twenty-three, and three years later was elected Prior. We cannot suppose that the Carthusians were given to impetuous or ill-considered action. The choice is significant. In fact, Guigo held this post for thirty of the most crucial years in the early history of the Carthusians. He made the first foundations and wrote the *Consuetudines* (*Customs*). He edited the Letters of St. Jerome (and the edition has recently been found). He wrote his *Meditations* as well as a life of St. Hugh, Bishop of Grenoble. In 1132 he rebuilt the Grande Chartreuse which had been destroyed by an avalanche.

The present Letter is supposed to have been written after this event, toward the end of Guigo's life. (He died 27 July, 1136.) We do not know to whom it was addressed, nor do we know how he responded to the invitation.

The Letter itself is a masterpiece of its kind, surely worthy of an assiduous reader of Jerome. It contains some of the classical tropes on the solitary life; the *otium negotiosum*, or the contemplative leisure which is more productive than any activity; the *militia Christi*, in which the monk, soldier of Christ, fights not against others but against his own passions, overcoming the world in himself, offering his bodily life in sacrifice to Christ. The hermit, sitting alone in silence and poverty, is the 'true philosopher' because, as Guigo says in another place he seeks "the truth in its nakedness, stripped and nailed to the Cross" ("*Sine aspectu et decore, crucique affixa, adoranda est veritas!*")

It is this utter devotion to truth that has led Guigo himself, we feel, into solitude. To love solitude is to love truth, for in solitude one is compelled to grapple with illusion. The solitary life is a battle with

subjectivity in which victory is to be gained not by the subject but by Truth. Unless we struggle with the falsity and delusion in ourselves, we can never break through the deceptive veil of rationalizations with which ‘the world’ adorns and conceals its empty wisdom.

There is an inimitable naked power in the austere style of Guigo the Carthusian from which every suggestion of ornament, indeed every useless word is ruthlessly excluded. The extraordinary compression of this thought and language convey something of the fervor, the passionate seriousness of this saint and genius, a pure exemplar of the Carthusian spirit and certainly the greatest Carthusian writer.

Abbey of Gethsemani, Lent, 1963.

Editor's notes

1. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), French mathematician, physicist, religious philosopher, and master of prose, author of the *Pensées (Thoughts)*. He propagated a religious doctrine that taught the experience of God through the heart rather than through reason.

2. This Guigo, also known as Guigo I, or Guigo of Saint Romain, after the name of the castle where he was born, is not to be confused with Guigo II (died 1193), 9th Prior of the Grande Chartreuse, who wrote an important work on prayer, the *Ladder of Paradise* or *Ladder for Monks*, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n° 2654.

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THE LETTER

To the Reverend N.
Guigo
Least of those servants
of the Cross who are in the Charterhouse
to live and to die...
for Christ.

One man will think another happy. I esteem him happy above all who does not strive to be lifted up with great honors in a palace, but who elects, humble, to live like a poor country man in a hermitage; who with thoughtful application loves to meditate in peace; who seeks to sit by himself in silence.

For to shine with honors, to be lifted up with dignities is in my judgment a way of little peace, subject to perils, burdened with cares, treacherous to many, and to none secure. Happy in the beginning, perplexed in its development, wretched in its end. Flattering to the unworthy, disgraceful to the good, generally deceptive to both. While it makes many wretched, it satisfies none, makes no one happy.

But the poor and lonely life, hard in its beginning, easy in its progress, becomes, in its end, heavenly. It is constant in adversity, trusty in hours of doubt, modest in those of good fortune. Sober fare, simple garments, laconic speech, chaste manners. The highest ambition, because without ambition. Often wounded with sorrow at the thought of past wrong done, it avoids present, is wary of future evil. Resting on the hope of mercy, without trust in its own merit, it thirsts after heaven, is sick of earth, earnestly strives for right conduct, which it retains in constancy and holds firmly for ever. It fasts with determined constancy in love of the cross, yet consents to eat for the body's need. In both it observes the greatest moderation for when it dines it restrains greed and when it fasts, vanity. It is devoted to reading, but mostly in the Scripture canon and in holy books where it is more intent upon the inner marrow of meaning than on the froth of words. But you may praise or wonder more at this: that such a life is continually idle yet never lazy. For it finds many things indeed to do, so that time is more often lacking to it than this or that occupation. It

more often laments that its time has slipped away than that its business is tedious.

What else? A happy subject, to advise leisure, but such an exhortation seeks out a mind that is its own master, concerned with its own business disdaining to be caught up in the affairs of others, or of society. Who so fights as a soldier of Christ in peace as to refuse double service as a soldier of God and a hireling of the world. Who knows for sure it cannot here be glad with this world and then in the next reign with God.

Small matters are these, and their like, if you recall what drink He took at the gibbet, Who calls you to kingship. Like it or not, you must follow the example of Christ poor if you would have fellowship with Christ in His riches. If we suffer with Him, says the Apostle, we shall reign with Him. If we die with Him, then we shall live together with Him. The Mediator Himself replied to the two disciples who asked Him if one of them might sit at His right hand and the other at His left: "Can you drink the chalice which I am about to drink?" Here He made clear that it is by cups of earthly bitterness that we come to the banquet of the Patriarchs and to the nectar of heavenly celebrations.

Since friendship strengthens confidence I charge, advise and beg you, my best beloved in Christ, dear to me since the day I knew you, that as you are farseeing, careful, learned and most acute, take care to save the little bit of life that remains still unconsumed, snatch it from the world, light under it the fire of love to burn it up as an evening sacrifice to God. Delay not, but be like Christ both priest and victim, in an odor of sweetness to God and to men.

Now, that you may fully understand the drift of all my argument, I appeal to your wise judgment in few words with what is at once the counsel and desire of my soul. Undertake our observance as a man of great heart and noble deeds, for the sake of your eternal salvation. Become a recruit of Christ and stand guard in the camp of the heavenly army watchful with your sword on your thigh against the terrors of the night.

Here, then, I urge you to an enterprise that is good to undertake, easy to carry out and happy in its consummation. Let prayers be said, I beg you, that in carrying out so worthy a business you may exert

yourself in proportion to the grace that will smile on you in God's favor. As to where or when you must do this thing, I leave it to the choice of your own prudence. But to delay or to hesitate will not, as I believe, serve your turn.

I will proceed no further with this, for fear that rough and uncouth lines might offend you, a man of palaces and courts.

An end and a measure then to this letter, but never an end to my affection of love for you.

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