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## Disciples Alone

*If you live alone,  
whose feet will you wash?*

St Basil the Great  
Fourth century

In the early days of my Christian searching there appeared to be two basic options: to be married or to become a member of a religious community. No one spoke to me of a third option: that I might simply remain as I was, a single woman. Even now in these more lay-conscious times it seems that little has been worked out in the way of spirituality for those who either consciously choose not to marry or find that the single life has somehow chosen them. I am not talking here specifically of those who feel called to a life of celibacy but to the wider body of individuals who find themselves, for what ever reason, alone.

People live alone for many reasons. Some make a positive decision for a life of celibacy and take public or private vows. Some are divorced, some widowed or deserted and others find that marriage just never came their way or that they did not particularly want to share their lives with another person. Whatever the reason for their single status such people, men or women, must find a *modus vivendi* that works for them, in which they can be well and happy and fruitful. In this chapter I would like to explore some of my own experience of discipleship lived alone in the hope that it may be relevant for others.

I did not set out to live alone, indeed for many years, like most young women, I assumed that I would marry and live happily ever after. Then, in my teens, I felt a calling to the religious life and for the next twenty years or so I played a sort of hide and seek game with what I thought of as the Hound of Heaven. Eventually, in my early forties, I made

my 'fiat' and with a massive leap of faith entered a monastic community of women. Eighteen months later I was again in the world, psychologically quite battered and very clear that I had no vocation to be a nun. It was not that I had 'lost' my vocation through carelessness or infidelity, just that religious life in community was not for me. So what then? What do you do when the Carthusian monk inside you has tried to give away everything to follow Christ – and then crawled back bleeding and in tears? What do you do with the story of Jesus and the rich young man which has inspired and tormented you for most of your lifetime? Do you decide that the call to sell all is directed at someone else – or do you try and live it out wherever you happen to be, clinging to the call of the radical gospel with a grim determination and bleeding broken fingernails?

When I was on my way out of the convent in 1980 I spent a couple of nights at Stanbrook Abbey, a large Benedictine monastery where I know a number of the nuns. The then abbess, a tall and regal lady, came up to me in the refectory and, towering above me, said in her best abbatial tones, 'Sheila, *what* have you been doing?' Nonplussed, I muttered that I had been trying to fit myself like a square peg into a round hole. She paused, thoughtful, for a moment and then, with devastating simplicity, said, 'Why don't you just be Sheila?'

I was too battered and sick at heart then to laugh or realise the depth of her wisdom but I have spent the last seven years doing just that and I commend it as a rule of life for all who find themselves exhausted and bewildered in their search to do God's will. As another monastic friend put it to me, 'the great moment of take-off comes when we stop trying to do God's will and allow his will to be done in us'.

But just being Sheila was not something I learned to do overnight – nor will you learn to be Mary or Michael or whoever in the twinkling of an eye. Discovering who one is and how one is meant to live and be seems to take a lifetime of trial and error, laughter and tears. In those early post-convent days I still wanted to be a cross between Joan of Arc, Michael Hollings and Helder Camara and I set out to live my life accordingly. For a little while I tried to be a hermit, living in a caravan on my brother's farm but it was not long

before penury drove me back to the only work I know: being a doctor.

Having rediscovered, to my surprise, that this was my true vocation I set out to live the demands of the radical gospel as a resident in a Plymouth hospital. The first thing I knew with great clarity was that I must never own property again. Having given away my house in Chile and sold my Devon home to give the money to the poor I was determined not to be shackled by possessions yet again. I would live in the hospital residency, keep a little of my salary for pocket money and give the rest away to feed the starving of the Third World.

This lasted about three weeks until I made a friend and wanted to ask her to stay for the weekend. Even radical disciples must have someone to play with, I reasoned, but where was she going to sleep? On the floor of your room, you might reasonably answer, but I was forty-four not twenty, and a fretful sleeper at the best of times. That time I was able to borrow a room from the hospital but I realised that if I was to have any kind of social life I must move out of the hospital and find somewhere to live. For the next few weeks I searched for a flat to rent. Not a large flat, of course, just a small home where I could live the simple life and have friends of like mind to stay. The trouble with flats, I discovered, was that there were very few to rent unfurnished and those with furniture were both expensive and decorated in a style which did not particularly appeal to me. I was bemoaning this fact to one of my colleagues, a man twenty years my junior, when he said to me in an exasperated voice, 'But why don't you *buy* a flat, like the rest of us? The mortgage payments work out cheaper than the rent.'

So much for my ambition not to own property! I took his advice and set out to buy a flat. It would be a small one, inexpensive so that I would still be in solidarity with the poor (well, the moderately poor!). But of course the simple life does not come naturally to middle-aged middle-class lady doctors and when I contemplated buying a flat in one of the poorer areas of town the nurses laughed at me and said, 'Don't be stupid. You wouldn't be safe to walk in the street at night down there.' Then one day the estate agent rang up and said, 'Doctor Cassidy, we've found your flat!' And so he had: it was an attic flat overlooking the sea in a nice safe part

of town, so I got a mortgage and moved in to live happily ever after.

But the Helder Camara in me was not yet ready to give way to the real Sheila. Determined to be *seen* to be poor I vowed to furnish the place entirely with second-hand things and leave the floors spartanly bare. That was the winter my back went and I spent many agonising moments on my knees trying to sweep the bare stairs with a dust pan and brush. Eventually I gave in and had the place carpeted and bought a vacuum cleaner so that I did not have to bend down. But if a Hoover was a justifiable necessity, a washing machine certainly was not. I would wash my clothes by hand, trampling the sheets and towels underfoot in the bath like the peasants or some crazy monk friends of mine! All that summer my clothes got greyer and greyer until I could bear it no longer and gave a pile of towels and shirts to my cleaning lady to wash at home. (I should have added that somewhere along the way I had acquired a cleaning lady: if I could not be in solidarity with the poor, at least I could give them work!) It took only three weeks for me to calculate that the two pounds a week that I was paying to have shirts and two towels washed would be more intelligently spent on weekly payments on a washing machine so the next Saturday afternoon I abandoned the simple life and bought one.

Perhaps the final fall from my self-styled perch of grace came at the beginning of the winter season when *Brideshead Revisited* was serialised for television. Until then I had stalwartly refused to have more than a transistor radio and tape recorder, but now I could bear it no longer and rushed into town to buy myself a TV.

What then is the lesson to be learned from this 'failure' to live the simple life? I am hesitant to pontificate lest I be accused of justifying my weakness and self-indulgence. I can only observe that each step I made towards the norm for the people among whom I lived left me a little less arrogant and a little less pleased with myself. As the years have passed I have become less rather than more sure of what it means to follow the gospel demands in the middle of a materialist society. What I am quite clear about, however, is that my place, at this moment, is to be planted right in the middle of that society. And the great joke is that, the more I get to know the ordinary people who inhabit this wicked materialist

world the more I am amazed by their generosity and goodness. They may have washing machines and hi-fis, videos and colour television but they are often more loving and compassionate and forgiving than those whose energies are consumed with living the simple life. The older I get the less I know except that the one thing that really matters is loving. The really disconcerting thing for Christians is when they meet non-believers who are more honest, more generous and more loving than they are. It happened to me in prison in Chile and it happens to me every day now in Plymouth. As I have remarked before, the Spirit of God blows where it wills and we Christians have no monopoly on goodness.

As the years go by I become more and more convinced of the truth of the Abbess of Stanbrook's advice and I have learned to be more gentle with myself. On the notice board in my bedroom I have a post card which depicts a fat yellow, lion-like beast having spots patiently stuck all over his coat: spots that will surely come unstuck in the first shower of rain. For years I have tried to be something that I am not and it just does not work. I who would like to be tall and thin, naturally ascetic and intellectual, am short and a bit plump and like watching television and reading whodunits. I would like to be the sort of person who unwinds from the day's work by listening to classical music – but I do not. I do it by gossiping on the phone or watching TV. I would like to be tidy and content with few possessions – but I am extremely messy and acquire an inordinate amount of clutter! Little by little, though, I am coming to appreciate the Sheila that God made and be content with my gifts and personality. It does not mean that I do not struggle to overcome my frailties but that I am less disheartened by my failures than I used to be.

This learning to understand ourselves and being patient with our needs and frailties is particularly important for people who live alone. If I do not have a husband to cherish me and protect me from doing too much I must learn to look after myself. It is not just a question of eating sensibly and going to bed at midnight but of learning where my limits are and what lifts me when I am down. I have to give myself permission to say no to requests I cannot handle and to take time out when I need it. To put it bluntly, when you live alone you have a responsibility to take care of yourself because no one else will and you are no use to anyone if you burnout

before your time! It is not only illogical but arrogant to think that we are exempt from the common human need for rest, for fun and for time out.

How you reconcile your own needs with the poverty and anguish of the Third World is a question of experimentation and balance. There are, I believe, two basic concepts which can inform our thinking and guide our decision-making. The first is the concept of global family. This says that we are all children of the same God, with the same rights to food, shelter, work and freedom. This means that we must care about injustice and poverty and the threat of nuclear war. How we express that caring will depend upon our gifts and resources at any given moment.

The second concept is that of the stewardship of resources. This means that I am a steward, not an owner of my health, my intelligence, my gifts and my possessions. If my gifts enable me to earn more than I need, then I must share what I have with those who are less gifted. Just how I live out this philosophy will depend upon my strength and courage at any given moment. As in other areas in which I preach there is a massive gulf between theory and praxis but basically it means that I try to find what I need to be well and happy and stick to that. It means that I am not always aiming for a bigger and better house or car or record player but am content with what I have and it also means that I am happy to share my possessions with those around me. I do not pretend that this is radical gospel living but it is what I can manage here and now. There is no doubt that I have more possessions now than the day I came out of the convent but I hope too that I have more understanding of the frailty of ordinary people.

Another area in which we must know ourselves is that of our *emotional* needs. It has taken me many years and a good deal of professional assistance to undo the conditioning of a puritanical religious upbringing in which I was taught to be ashamed of my body and my longing for warmth and affection. It is a great joy to me now to know myself known and loved by the God who made me and to understand that all that I feel and am is his work. It is not my intention to write down an answer to the inevitable question of 'How far can you go?' but simply to say that I am grateful to those who

have taught me to accept my sexuality as God-given and intrinsically good.

There remains of course a gulf between the *acknowledgement* of oneself as a normal human being yearning for love and affection and the meeting of those needs. In this area I am far from having all the answers but I share with you what I believe to be one very important insight: if you fill every day, every evening and every weekend with work, then you will crowd out the space that is essential for being with friends and being peaceably on your own. It is so easy, if one is single, to work during the day and get caught up in meetings, conferences and good works in the evenings and weekends so that when one does suddenly find the evening is free there is a devastating void and sense of loneliness that leaves one feeling worthless, stupid and unloved.

I recall some years ago when I was working full-time in medicine and doing human rights lecturing or preaching most weekends that I sought the help of a psychologist in the belief that he would help me organise myself to be more productive. I thought that with a little expert advice I would be able to cram even more into my life. I sent him an enormous and complex timetable of my life, and other engagements of the past three years, colour coded to show whether they were national or local, human rights or religious, and so on. I do not know if I had expected him to compliment me on my energy or my good works but he looked me straight in the eye and said, with a lovely Scottish accent, 'Thank you for sending me your material; I've read it carefully and I'm appalled.'

Perhaps the Scots articulate the word 'appalled' in a special way; but his comment went home and I listened with unwonted attention and humility while he explained to me that I was destroying myself with overwork and a lifestyle which denied most of my ordinary human needs for rest, friendship and recreation. It has taken a very long time to unscramble the mess that I was so proud of and I am still very vulnerable to overstretching myself but I am now much healthier and less lonely than I was a couple of years ago. Slowly I am learning that the cure for loneliness is not to be away from home every weekend but to make quite sure that I am not away too much. One must learn to love one's home

and be at peace in it for otherwise one is without an anchor and at the mercy of every wave and undercurrent.

I still do not fully understand the psychology of women and their homes but I believe that there is a deep connection between the place one lives in and the person one is. Like one's clothes it becomes an extension of oneself, a means of expressing who one is. I have come to love my home so that, like Mole in *The Wind in the Willows*, my whiskers twitch at the thought of it when I have been away too long. The cheap purple carpet that I found in my bedroom when I bought the place has long since gone and I have spent more money than I would have once thought proper upon alterations, decorating and furnishing. Perhaps I have fallen so far from grace that I have lost sight of my original gospel ideals. I do not know. But what I do know is that for a number of years I have been involved in a demanding ministry of healing the sick and preaching the gospel and I have now worked out a way of life that works for me, a *modus vivendi* in which I can be well and happy and in which my various gifts are being used creatively for others.

I like to think that, although I am once more a woman of many possessions, I cling to them less fiercely than before and that I use them in accordance with the rule of thumb laid down by Ignatius of Loyola in his Principle and Foundation:

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.

All the other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created.

Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him.

Therefore we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honour to dishonour, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all things.

Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created. (*Spiritual Exercises*)

## Praying Alone

*Prayer and work  
are not whole without each other.*

*Rule for a New Brother*  
Blessed Sacrament Fathers  
Brackkenstein Community, Holland

If there is one thing, one belief that Christian carers have in common, it is the conviction that they don't pray enough! The majority of men and women, in vows or not, who are struggling to live their lives according to the demands of the gospel are convinced of the need for prayer – but they find it very difficult to carry this conviction into practice. I should say at the outset that I do not think I pray enough either, but at least this gives me some insight into the problems.

What are the difficulties then, in combining a ministry of caring with a life of prayer – is it even possible? Should those of us who feel called to a deep relationship with God in prayer down tools and make for the nearest Carmelite or Benedictine monastery? Many of us do, of course, and emerge bruised and perplexed, one, five or even twenty years later. Some have the good sense to know without trying the life that they could not survive cooped up in a convent, but perhaps they decide that, since they have no calling to the religious life they can have no calling to prayer.

I believe that one of the problems in helping people to combine a life of prayer with an active apostolate is a purely semantic issue: the meaning of the word *contemplative*. In modern religious parlance, there are two broad categories of religious life: the *active* and the *contemplative*. Those men and women called to the active life involve themselves in such activities as nursing or teaching or other pastoral activities. They are expected to say their prayers night and morning

and get on with their work in between. No one expects of them that they will become mystics or contemplatives: they are the Marthas, the busy ones whose job it is to wash feet, to serve. The contemplative life, we are brought up to believe, is for those with a special vocation for prayer, with a higher calling. These are the Marys, those who have 'chosen the better part'. They must leave 'the world' to its own devices, withdrawing from its pleasures, distractions and demands so that they can devote their life wholly to God. These are the monastic men and women, the Carmelites, the Cistercians and the Benedictines: those who would embrace the dry martyrdom of renunciation, and who are truly fools for Christ.

I believe that this division into the 'active' and the 'contemplative' life is not only simplistic, but inaccurate. I believe, furthermore, that it is actually quite dangerous, for people with a desire for prayer but unfitted for the *enclosed* life find themselves in convents where they are ill at ease and unhappy. Such men or women, knowing that they are called to a life of prayer, may enter monastery after monastery, only to leave each one emotionally wounded and with an ever deepening sense of failure. Others who never even make it into the cloisters spend their lives looking wistfully through the wrong side of the grille wishing they too had a 'vocation' to be a contemplative.

The truth is, of course, that while a few people are indeed both attracted and suited to the enclosed religious life, the vast majority of us must live out our discipleship in the wider community, marrying for better or for worse, rearing our children and earning our living as best we may. But though only a minority of people are called to the *enclosed* life of the monk or nun, a great many find themselves drawn to a life of contemplative prayer. That is why it is so important that we do not use the words *enclosed* and *contemplative* interchangeably, for while it is true that some men and women find that their contemplative prayer flowers in the desert of the monastery, others will grow *only* in the midst of society, in the marketplace. If a man or woman experiences that indefinable hunger for God and for prayer that are the signs of a contemplative vocation they must discern, *not* whether or not they have a calling *to* prayer, but *where*, desert or marketplace, they should live out that calling.

To some people there is great mystery and grace about the