

A mob of sanctified shut-ins would protest that aloneness can be edifying



“St Gemma Galgani – mystic and stigmatist – was reputedly brought coffee in bed by her guardian angel. Learning about this angelic Deliveroo service recently, I was immediately taken with the idea – although my own guardian angel has disappointingly failed to respond to hints I've been dropping to that effect.

Part of the reason why I like the story is my near-infinite appetite for what's lurid and grotesque in Catholic spirituality. When I first heard of Flannery O'Connor's proposal that the Church adopt a motto reading: "We Guarantee to Corrupt Nothing But Your Taste", it felt like a personal attack. But I liked reading about Galgani's coffee-toting cherub for another reason, too. I found it consoling.

I wasn't surprised that lockdown made me twitchy and tense. I was surprised by how lonely I became, and how intense that feeling was: how I spent hours and days feeling overwhelmed, not by external difficulties but by a sharp, painful awareness of my own lack. Low moods, hard days, troubled weeks: I had experienced all these before. But my own need for company and conversation; the way in which solitude made me humiliatingly desperate for speech and touch: this was a journey into terra incognita, into the blank spaces on the map of myself.

Aloneness occupies a liminal, contested place in the Christian tradition. Christ carried out his ministry among great crowds, some spiritual writers emphasise. But he received it in the desert, others respond – a long way from other people, and a short way from God. Is it really not good for man to be alone? As a child – tubby, Tolkien-clutching and friendless – I felt sanguine about solitude. As an adult, I'm slightly more social – and inclined to the opposite view. If we never interacted with anyone else we would be less, not more like ourselves: we would be less and not more human.

But being less human isn't always unpleasant. I might have been confined to a single room for much of this past year – but within that minuscule sphere of influence I enjoyed absolute power. Forced into sociability, I found myself self-absorbed and irritable, unused to balancing my desires with those of others. Thoughts about myself had filled the mental space vacated by absent

friends. Contrary to assumptions, W.H. Auden noted, the reclusive are often romantics: but they only ever fall in love with themselves.

A mob of holy hermits, ascetic anchorites and sanctified shut-ins would stage an intervention at this point – protesting (presumably from a distance) that aloneness can be edifying. Étienne Gilson, neo-Thomist *illustriusso*, certainly thought so. Confined to a prisoner of war camp during the First World War, Gilson amazed his guards – and his fellow prisoners – by asking to be placed in solitary confinement. His request granted, Gilson was locked away from all human contact for eight days in 1915. What his comrades saw as a punishment, Gilson saw as a gift: "Being alone is not the worst situation a man can be in," he said. "Never to be alone is far worse."

And you can argue – quite easily – that we are, nowadays, almost never alone. Email, social media, phone calls and texts: most of us spend our days engulfed by a buzzing nimbus of communications as impersonal as they are instantaneous. We are very rarely alone – but, equally, never really together. "A networked society?" Yes – but the cost of the adjective is the meaning of the noun.

However accustomed we are to darkness, light – and life – goes on. As lockdown lifted in May, I visited Cambridge: I met old friends, made new ones; talked (and ate) for hours on end. One Sunday, I visited Blackfriars, home to the town's Dominican friars. In the priory's garden, Conrad Pepler OP edited *New Blackfriars* from a rickety shack. Over the decades, Pepler's haven began to fall apart: animals and trees and the weather began to invade. Pepler didn't seem to mind. He heard the voices of angels in the wind.

I don't think he misheard. Solitude, for Christians, isn't an alternative to community, but something experienced within and alongside it. However complete our isolation, however absolute our loneliness, we are accompanied, every step of the way, living or dead, by the Church, by the saints and by God himself, in spirit and sacrament, with us till the end of the world. And also by the angels – with or without coffee.



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