

Dear Bishop Sisk,

You have asked me to respond to the following three questions, all of which I believe are valid and important questions to be asked and answered:

1. Does this church want to continue recognizing Solitaries?
2. Should this vocation be singled out for canonical recognition?
3. How does this vocation, as currently expressed, comport with our polity?

First, if my reading of history is accurate, the church has **never** wanted to recognize Solitaries. It has only done so to protect itself and to maintain some degree of control over the Solitaries it professes. Solitaries, like all Religious, are potentially dangerous; but then, if the scandals of our church over the past fifty years or so are any indication, so are presbyters and, yes, even a few bishops. However, the dangers of all forms of Religious vocation stem primarily from the prophetic nature of the very calling itself. As we can plainly see from the biblical record, prophets are never good life insurance risks. But that is because, standing as they do outside of the institutional structure, and having no institutional ladder to climb, they are in a position to speak the truth (rightly or wrongly) as they see it without any political considerations. That makes them both valuable and, at the same time, risky.

The flip side of this question is, should Solitaries want to be recognized by the church in a formal (canonical) sense? While it is clear that canonical recognition gives the church a measure of control and protection, what does the Solitary get in return? As I see it, the Solitary gets one thing and one thing only – the spiritual virtue that comes from obedience. As I said to Bp. Grein before he professed me, I can live the vows of Poverty and Chastity with difficulty but with integrity without another person's involvement. But Obedience is impossible without a human mediator. It is the *sine qua non*. While the church cannot make Religious, including Solitaries, it can recognize them if it so chooses. The Solitary gains the whole spiritual dynamic of Obedience by going under vow, at the same time he or she loses the freedom which is commensurate with Obedience. I have advised numerous seekers to be absolutely sure they want to give up that freedom in order to gain canonical recognition of one's obedient relationship.

The second question, should the church profess solitaries at all, is an important question, and a valid one. First, solitaries have always existed in the church in one form or another, and they will continue to exist. God, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, creates them; the church merely recognizes them if it is in the best interests of the church to do so. "John 3:8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" and it requires the canonical recognition of no one in order to do so. In an ideal world, all baptized Christians would resemble the community at Little Gidding. But this is not an ideal world – nominal Christianity has been the norm since the Emperor Constantine had his entire army baptized. Professing solitaries provides two benefits to the church – first, it provides a measure of cover for institutional southern exposure should the church make the mistake of professing an emotionally unstable person, or someone who for other reasons is manifestly inappropriate to the vocation, and second, professing solitaries provides a group of people within the institution whose only reason for existence is to pray. After all, that is the vocation – to pray without ceasing. After years in the Order of the Holy Cross leading retreats and groups of clergy, and hearing priests complain that they have no time to pray, I suggest that it is a good thing for the church that there are some people whose vocation is to do nothing else.

The third question you pose has to do with comportment with church polity. The only response I can make is, "No, the Solitary vocation as it is envisioned by the canon does not in any way comport with our church polity." But then, it never has, either for us or for Roman Catholics or Orthodox Christians. In fact, it is not supposed to.

The Religious Life in general has never neatly fit into the Roman military structure that is outlined in the Ignatian letters or in later church polity. The only structural/political advantage coenobitic religious have enjoyed over eremitical religious in the eyes of the ecclesiastical structure is that it is much easier for the church to corral monks, nuns, and friars into monasteries and friaries in order to exercise some measure of control over them. Whether or not bishops should hold eremitical vows in modern times at all is highly debatable. As I understand our recent history, the only reason that the existing canon came to be was because some bishops were already holding Solitary vows, and the canon sought to regularize this practice, which has its origin in medieval English ecclesial history. In short, some bishops are going to profess Solitaries anyway, whether or not the practice is canonical.

It is worth exploration whether it might be better to expand the current canon to include the Orthodox practice of allowing spiritual directors, priests, and others to hold Solitary vows. But whoever holds the vows of a Solitary, that Solitary will be an ecclesiastical misfit. Solitaries are supposed to be so. They are called to be misfits. The very fact that Solitaries are called to be solitary and yet are called by virtue of their baptismal vows to be part of the Christian community makes the ambiguity of their vocation quite obvious. All you have to do is to draw a classical organization chart of a diocese, and you will quickly see that Religious in general, and Solitaries in particular, do not fit anywhere in the chart.

On the whole, my experience of the past eleven years in life profession as a Solitary is that the church has a good deal more to gain by professing Solitaries than most eremitical Religious have to gain by being professed. God creates vocations, bishops don't. As for most of the 20th century, religious communities existed in the Episcopal Church without any canonical recognition at all. If the church chooses to withdraw canonical recognition from the Solitary vocation, Solitaries will continue to exist. It is only up to the bishops whether or not they choose to recognize that vocational calling and make it official. I don't know whether it makes a great deal of difference to other Solitaries what the bishops choose to do about God's creative work. I sincerely doubt, however, whether it makes any difference to God at all.

Sincerely,

Br. Randall Horton