

WHERE do you go when you need to push the limits of your understanding, capability or experience? The men and women who became perhaps the earliest recognisable Christian monastics made their way into the deserts of Judea, Sinai, and Egypt from the second century CE onwards. Many were driven by the desire to follow the example of Jesus himself, who discovered the desert to be the place of testing, encounter, and ultimately affirmation.

Inspired by the desert experience of Jesus, by the desert location of John the Baptist, by the desert proclaiming prophets, and in some cases by the idea of finding a new martyrdom, a move to the wilderness began.

Initially, this seems to have been a haphazard flow of individuals setting themselves up in caves and shelters, disconnected from others, an eremitic or hermit movement (the word "eremitic" has Greek roots meaning something like

Journey into a dark wood

Ian Adams begins a series on monasticism and contemporary life

"desert" and "uninhabited"). But in time this pattern evolved, as many of these proto-monks and -nuns began to discover the advantages of sharing their spiky pieces of desert with a few others.

The toughness of wilderness living, the discovery of the importance of shared practice, and the necessity for shared wisdom (the writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers are full of references to wise fathers and mothers) led to the creation of the first Christian monastic settlements — small sketes of humble dwellings gathered together, where each monk

had their own shelter, but with some shared communal space.

The earliest religious had thus discovered that absolute or permanent solitude is not for most of us, and that some degree of community is good and even necessary. They discovered that the repetition of prayer and the practice of action somehow work best in the company of others — and are more easily honed in a place of simplicity.

In time, these discoveries would assist the evolution of religious life further into cenobitic monasticism ("cenobitic" is derived from Greek

words for "common" and "life"), with community life forming in the context of a permanent shared monastic settlement.

Whether entered into in the company of others or in solitude, however, the practice of stillness, study, and prayer — what I am referring to as the cave — had become firmly established as central features of the religious life, shaping every monastic movement since.

So what might cave-dwelling look like in "regular life"? These proto-monks discovered, as had their mentor, Jesus, that when we go into

solitude, the "wild beasts" will make their appearance (Mark 1.13). Try being in silence or solitude, and you will soon make this discovery for yourself. Contrary, perhaps, to some perceptions, a retreat can sometimes turn out to be less some gentle downtime, more of a journey into a dark wild wood, with wolves circling.

But if this experience is uncomfortable, in time it may bring freedom. These first monastics learned through their experience of aloneness, deprivation, and darkness that it is possible to confront our fears; that the opposite of — and antidote to — fear is love; and that we are at the very centre of a relentless Love that carries all before it.

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