

Withdrawing from the World, as we are journeying towards God.

How does a person with responsibilities in the world withdraw from it?

"All who have willingly left the things of the world have certainly done so either for the sake of the future Kingdom, or because of the multitude of their sins, or for love of God. If they were not moved by any of these reasons, their withdrawal from the world was unreasonable." (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, by St John Climacus, Step 01:5)

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I am not a monk. I minister to those who are not monks. Saint John was writing to Monks, but perhaps even in his wisdom, he did not understand that his book would be used by Christians throughout the centuries regardless of whether they were in the monastic life or not.

For laypeople (and for all people), withdrawing from the world must start with a knowledge of who they are and who they are becoming. They must know their purpose, and they must understand that their purpose is not in any way different from that of the holiest hermits and monastics. We are called in this temporal life to become eternal and perfected beings. Nothing else matters in this life.

If we are attached to anything in this life besides God, then, to the extent that we are attached, we are not in any tangible way withdrawing from the world. If we are struggling against our attachments, then God in His mercy will see our feeble struggles and will be assisting us in withdrawing from the world.

Withdrawal from the world is not just to flee from things that are considered worldly; it is a journey *towards* God. Perhaps we should not say "withdrawal from the world" as much as we should say a "journey to God" and to the fulfillment of our purpose, the entire reason why we were created. When we are on an important journey, we are anxious to meet our destination and not let anything not related to the journey distract us.

Withdrawal from the world also means that we learn not to value the things of the flesh. Pleasures of the flesh are not sinful unless we covet them. If we want comfort or money and are not willing to give to the poor or our parish because we want to save the money for our old age, we are not withdrawing from the world, and indeed our hearts are very small.

How do we learn not to covet the things of the world, the comforts of the world, our money, and our entertainments? We learn by experiencing God. Our heartfelt desire every day should be that we experience God, and our lamentation should be that our passions and the darkness in our heart make it difficult, and on some days, so distant from us as to be almost invisible. The Apostle teaches that we see through a glass darkly, and the reason the images are indistinct is because of our passions. Do we believe this?

Every Great Lent, and indeed every day, but despite our weakness and intransigence, let us at least every Great Lent decide to be more generous and less miserly. Let us choose to give more of our funds and of our hearts to others.

Holy Isaiah said, we are people of unclean lips, and we live among people of unclean lips, so how dare we believe that we, dragging all of our sins with us, can be withdrawing from the world? We must believe this. We must attempt this! We must succeed in this! God will take the feeblest effort and magnify it. We are not responsible for being competent. We are accountable for our effort, and God provides the competence.

The scripture tells us that, "A man shall draw nigh and the heart is deep, and God shall be exalted." (Ps 63:6b-7a) We all have a deep heart, so deep that it can contain all of the Uncontainable God and all of our neighbors. Let us begin or continue to withdraw from the world by adding more of God and more of our neighbors to our hearts. Let us open our eyes and see that among us are those that have needs. They are in our family and our place of work, in our parish, and everywhere. We might be aware of them because of personal contact or email or social media correspondence, or news reports. Whoever they are, if they have come to our heart,

we must not cast them out. We must retain them in our hearts; this is withdrawing from the world because retaining people in our hearts is happening because of the journey towards God.

This is especially the way that a layperson must withdraw from the world. A monk also does this because this is the life of any Christian, but he also performs ascetical feats that we are unable to perform. Regardless of what ascetic feats we can perform, we all are able to add people to our hearts and keep them there.

We must pray every day in our closet. We must pray with our blood, with our sweat, and with tears if we are able to have them. We must pray for those people that are in our hearts; we must feel their need and even the crisis that is in their life. We are all in crisis. If we do not think that we are in crisis and that sin is banging at the door and that the lion is roaring about and could devour us, we are too attached to the world to see spiritual things right before our eyes.

Christian! Withdraw from the world! Withdraw by journeying towards God. If you cannot wholly withdraw, then do what you are able to do! You are able to do more than you think you can do. You are able to have time in prayer in the evening or the morning without distraction. You are able to do more than say a few prayers from the prayer book, but also to do prostrations for your loved ones and for those who have needs, and for everyone who is in your heart. You are able to ask the prayers of various saints that are also in your heart. You are able to say the Prayer of Saint Ephrem with effort and with longing.

Perhaps someone will protest to me and say, "I cannot do prostrations because of my back or because of a medical condition or because I am out of shape." Don't listen to those excuses! If you cannot physically do a prostration by going down to the floor and coming back up, do a deep bow. If you cannot do a deep bow, then make the sign of the cross and reproach yourself and pray for your loved ones and everyone in your heart.

Do not let your bodily infirmities or perhaps your bodily laziness keep you from praying with your heart. Do not let that great lie of Satan, that we do not have enough time or that our required duties make it impossible to pray with intensity and with our heart every day, keep you from praying with your heart! You are able to do much more than you think you can do! You must try to do a little bit more, and God will magnify this effort, and then you will be able to do much more.

If you must rise early to go to work or because the children arise early in the morning, get up a little earlier! Perhaps you can stay up a little bit later and say your prayers when the household is quiet. Perhaps, if God makes you arise at midnight or 2 in the morning, you can stay up for a little while, and you can pray, if not with prostrations, then at least with zeal. You can pray the Jesus prayer or chant the psalter. Perhaps you will fall asleep when you are doing this, and that will be a blessed sleep, and God will give you the bodily rest you require.

Saint John tells us in the short quotation that there are unreasonable reasons to withdraw from the world. What is your reason for prayer? Is it because of habit, or is it because you think this is required of you? Do you come to church because it is the expected thing to do? Do you give alms with one hand held out and the other one grasping your arm and trying to pull it back to your bosom? The only reason to give alms, and fast, and to pray with prostrations and tears and to have a set prayer rule and all of the rest is because God is greater than everything in the world, and everything in the world will go away. Only what we become because of our efforts and God's grace and our prayer and our tears will endure. Do you believe this? If you do, then find a way to be more ascetical this great let. Get up 15 minutes earlier, go to bed 15 minutes later, or when you need to go to the bathroom at 2 in the morning, stay up for a little bit and pray. God will reward you. The reward will be beyond all of your expectations.