



# *Raven's Bread*

*Food for Those in Solitude*

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[Back Issues](#)

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Raven's Bread is a quarterly newsletter for hermits and those interested in the eremitical life. The newsletter affirms this life style as a valid means of living in deeper fidelity to God and in spiritual union with the whole human race. Raven's Bread is a collaborative effort and thus depends on the shared reflections, stories, news, notices, letters, and information from hermits themselves. The Raven's Bread web page is an abbreviated version of our full newsletter, which also includes a bulletin board and reader forum.

Please send your written contributions, as well as address changes and subscriptions to:

Raven's Bread, Karen (Karper) Fredette  
P.O. Box 562  
Hot Springs, NC 28743

The annual subscription to the printed newsletter costs \$7.50. Any extra donations will be used to subsidize subscriptions for hermits who cannot afford the full cost.

To e-mail Karen directly click on this link: [103517.210@compuserve.com](mailto:103517.210@compuserve.com)

Raven's Bread (formerly Marabou) derives its name from the experience of Elijah, the prophet, in 1 Kgs. 17: 1-6. A raven, sent by God, nourished him during his months of solitude at the Wadi Cherith (the Cutting Place).

## Thoughts in Solitude

The hermit life is codified in Canon 603 in two paragraphs, the first describing the LIFE itself, the second indicating juridical aspects of that life. Obviously, par. 1 is the more important for it outlines values that (1) are at the heart of eremitical living, (2) characterize the hermit "way of life", and (3) are normative in discerning and living one's call to this way of life.

Viewing Canon 603 from another angle, par. 1 can stand on its own, par. 2 hardly can. Indeed, one can fully and truly live the eremitic life at the heart of the church and world without being "recognized in the law" as such. Meeting the norms of par. 2 does not necessarily make one a hermit interiorly. One grows into becoming a hermit by listening and responding to the Spirit of Jesus day after day.

Tradition witnesses to the constancy of the elements of separation from the world, silence and solitude, prayer and penance, etc. which give meaning and direction to whatever is accidental, e.g. schedule, dress, type of work, location of hermitage - all of which make up the lifestyle. Hence the need to distinguish between what is essential or constant in the tradition of eremitical living, and what is contingent or accidental.

I see a profound distinction between a "way of life" and "lifestyle". One is called and committed to a way of life; one expresses the commitment through a lifestyle congruent with it. Hence the way of life comes first, is basic, essential; the lifestyle follows and is secondary and contingent. It is important that the "plan of life" mentioned in the second half of the canon (1) articulate one's response to God's call as perceived now, (2) reflect one's interior attitude, (3) focus on the essential elements of hermit living, and (4) remain open to further development. "Plan of life" is an English translation of **vivendi ratio**. **Vivendi** is a gerund, a verb-form lost in translation. "**Living**" the hermit life is more important than the plan or blueprint. In other words, however valuable a "plan of life" may be, it cannot and may not become a substitute for wholehearted living, day by day, in response to God's continually unfolding call.

By: Cecilia W. Wilms, Hermitage of Our Lady of the City, Spokane, WA



Peace! Autumn arrives early on our mountain and as I watch the rose of the dogwoods and gold of the poplars begin the procession of color across the slopes we view from our deck, I am reminded of Edward Hayes' Autumn Psalm of Fearlessness. He ponders the peacefulness of the falling leaves and dying vegetation: "As plants surrender their life, bending, brown and wrinkled, and yellow leaves of trees float to my lawn like parachute troops, they do so in a sea of serenity. I hear no fearful cries from creation, no screams of terror, as death daily devours once-green and growing life. Peaceful and calm is autumn's swan song, for she understands that hidden in winter's death-grip is spring's openhanded, full-brimmed breath of life."

I recover the truth that living fully NOW with as little concern for the morrow as I can manage is part of the Gospel behest to "Consider the lilies ... and the ravens." Speaking of the latter, Paul and I were thrilled the other day to observe one of the local (but rare) ravens soaring overhead with what looked like (yes!) a piece of bread in its beak. We could only speculate why it flew into view just as we were discussing this issue ...

Speaking of which, I wish to thank all of you who have contributed to this fall issue - with words of encouragement, with subscription renewals, and best of all, with written contributions which help **Raven's Bread** become the truly "interactive forum" we wish it to be. You will find a goodly number of responses to the question posed in the July issue. Many points of view are expressed and insights shared - what a genuine joy to pass them along!

As I pondered these letters, one theme seemed to emerge: the peculiar penchant of hermits for independence from too many regulations! I suspect this is so because those who embrace solitary life cherish their liberty of spirit and the joy which comes from finding their security in God alone rather than in meeting legislative norms.

Some concern has been registered about the focus of **Raven's Bread**. I assure you that even if our mailing list includes some readers who are not living in strict solitude (a change from previous policy), the focus of our newsletter continues to be nourishment for those living in or aspiring to the eremitical life. Another concern - about our presence on the Internet - is being prayed over. We intend to prevent anyone from accessing back issues without our consent and we assure all of you that names and addresses on our mailing list are held strictly confidential. For the present, we will continue our web site (by the favor of our Dominican brothers) since some hermits have found us via their computer. We pray that this issue will be a source of encouragement to you on your solitary path - which we must all walk separately while joined together in heart and spirit. Let us continue to pray for one another as the rich shades of autumn give way to the sacred stillness of winter and its time of Holy Waiting.

*With Grateful love, Karen*

## Sounding Solitude

This is the era of "telling one's story" or "sharing one's journey" - the marvelous and unique manifestation of God's call in each of us.

My own journey began when reading of the likeness of the Carmelite vocation to "the heart in the Body of Christ, pumping the life blood of loving prayer throughout the whole Body". Soon afterward, I found my way into the Carmelite family, and sixteen years later, was called out again in search of greater solitude, in search of a renewed way of living the charism.

The original inspiration of the thirteenth century Carmelite hermits was the prophet Elijah, and I found my own spirituality strongly identifying with the ebb and flow of his life of solitude and involvement (1 Kings 17-19). Vatican II's exhortation to religious communities to "return to the spirit of their founders," prompted me to return to the spirit of Elijah and those first Carmelite hermits.

These hermits are described by Thomas Merton in **Disputed Questions**, as having

"initiated something quite original and unique: a loose-knit community of hermits with an informal, occasional apostolate ... their life was left free and informal so that they could do anything that conformed to their ideal of solitude and free submission to the Holy Spirit." I recognized in Canon 603 the simplicity and flexibility needed to renew such a lifestyle in and for today's Church.

In **Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision**, Diarmuid O'Murchu identifies one way of returning to the spirit of a founder as "reappropriating those attitudes, perceptions, and values which determined and influenced the founder's options, ... the outcome of which today, may bear little or no resemblance to what the founding person actually did." Solitude, together with contemplative prayer, abandonment to the Holy Spirit, centrality of the Word of God, ongoing reformation of life, freedom and flexibility for prophetic witness, and solidarity with all, are those elements which I have chosen to re-appropriate in my own contemporary lifestyle. I remain in the world, live in reserve and support myself by common manual labor.

Thomas Merton, in his **Thoughts in Solitude** aptly expresses what I've found to be true: that "one becomes a solitary at the moment when no matter what may be one's external surrounding, one is suddenly aware of one's own inalienable solitude and sees that one will never be anything but solitary. From that moment, solitude is not potential - it is actual."

**Virginia Leach, Canonical Hermit, Diocese of San Jose, CA**

***"Solitude is not something you must hope for in the future. Rather it is a deepening of the present, and unless you look for it in the present, you will never find it." (Thomas Merton)***

## **America's Desert Fathers**

**by Fr. Jim Kennedy, Obl. Cam.**

### **St. Herman of Alaska**

A century after the Wissahickon hermits came to Pennsylvania, another hardy group of men came to North America. They were ten Russian Orthodox monks from the monastic laura of Valaamo on the islands of Lake Ladoga near modern Finland. Of these ten, (six priests, two deacons, and two laymen), only one would remain for the next forty years - Herman, a lay or choir monk.

After five years of productive labor in the Aleutian Islands among Aleuts, Eskimos and other indigenous groups, most of the monks died in a shipwreck between the Aleutians and Kamchatka. Herman was not among them. He alone would now hold aloft the Light of Christ.

Herman, at age 16, had entered the great Trinity-St. Sergius Laura near Petrograd in 1772. While there he became seriously ill and was cured by a vision of the Mother of God. After five years or so, he transferred to Valaamo Laura. Within a short time he was allowed to live as a hermit in the wilderness about a mile from the main monastery.

In Alaska he settled on Spruce Island in the Aleutian chain. Initially, he carved out a cave to live in which eventually became his burial site. Later he built a small wooden hermitage and a chapel. Not far away he constructed a guesthouse and school for orphans he cared for. He developed a vegetable garden which he fertilized with seaweed. Here he spent the next forty years and died at age 81.

His life was that of a true ascetic - his prayer that of a true hesychast. He kept the full round of Hours and Offices as observed in Russian monasticism. Like many of the early desert dwellers and Celtic hermits, he slept on a board with a stone pillow. He ate the vegetables he grew and sometimes fish - very sparingly. He patiently and lovingly won the Aleuts to Orthodox Christianity - to which most Aleuts remain faithful to this day. He actively defended the Aleuts and their human rights against exploitation by Russian traders. His regular companions included bears and other wild animals whom he fed, nursed and cared for.

On more than one occasion testified to by eye witnesses, he performed miracles: halting a forest fire in its path, and stopping flood waters with an Ikon of the Mother of

God. Like his contemporary, the Russian hermit St. Seraphim of Sarov, he read souls and had foreknowledge of future events. The man of God died Dec. 25, 1837. That night, though unaware of his death, people on Kodiak Island, including the local priest, and on Afognak Island witnessed a great pillar of light rise heavenward from Spruce island.

The Troparian from his canonization on August 9, 1970 salutes Blessed Father Herman of Alaska as "North Star of Christ's Holy church."

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**Forum Question for February 1998 issue:**

*What has been the most helpful factor to you in discerning and/or living your contemplative and eremitical call?* Please limit your response to 150 words or less so we can print as many as possible. Thanks!

**Deadline: January 5, 1998**



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***P.O. Box 562 Hot Springs, NC 28743***