



# ***Raven's Bread***

## ***Food for Those in Solitude***

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### ***Vol: 5 No: 1 February 2001***

***Raven's Bread*** is a quarterly newsletter for hermits and those interested in the eremitical life published by Paul and Karen Fredette. The newsletter seeks to affirm and support this way of life. ***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***  
**18065 Hwy 209**  
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The annual subscription to the printed newsletter is \$8.00 in USA and \$10.00 US currency for foreign subscriptions. (Drafts drawn on US banks are the most convenient form of payment by foreign subscribers.) Any extra donations will be used to subsidize subscriptions for hermits who cannot afford the full cost.

To E-mail ***Raven's Bread*** directly click on this link: [fredette@nclink.net](mailto:fredette@nclink.net)

***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**

***By: Linda McFarland, Lake Junaluska, NC***

I've been chewing on this issue's topic, discernment, since it was first published. What characterizes a hermit, and why would I choose to be one? How would my life be different?

Going back to my first copy of ***Raven's Bread*** (February 2000), I reread Eugene Stockton's list of nine traits common to hermits and solitaries. These included: strong sense of call (often from childhood), passion ("a relentless fire"), emotional distance from society, autonomy, self-sufficiency, simplicity, stillness and silence, growth in stewardship, and detachment. While I'm not sure I can claim to be a hermit (or a mystic or any other particular label), I will admit to being an introvert. And from my experience, if I were adding to Stockton's list, I would include an encounter with the Divine in which I felt totally bereft of human concern and protection, in utter desolation and absolute alienation. And discovering in having no one, not one soul, no other human being I could depend on, that God was all there was, and it was enough.

Stockton also alludes to balance, an issue that I struggle with on a daily basis. How do I spend enough time alone with God and still be in the world? How do I embody (give flesh to) God's presence in the material world? I can so easily stay in my head; I'm challenged to be grounded and stay present and awake and

aware. How do I find enough peace and quiet in the midst of activity and community? Being/doing; grounded and connected...how do I achieve this balance so I won't be pulled apart, scattered, and distracted.

Earning income is also an issue for me. My husband supports me financially, and while I contribute to our household in non-monetary ways, he still pays the mortgage, buys the food and other necessities. How would I live if I were self-supporting? How would I balance on the razor edge of providing for myself and trusting in Divine Providence?

So, after all this thought and rationalizing, I think and feel that Passion (Stockton's "primal urge to be one with God") is the bottom line; the one trait that makes the hermit life possible.

Do you yearn for this life? Does your heart long for it "as a hart pants for living water"? Would you, like Merton, beg the abbot for it? Does it ring in your soul, with the timbre of a Tibetan prayer bowl, rich and deep and resonant, creating a harmony clear, calming, settled?

This then is your calling. You answer with your life.

## **A Word from Still Wood**

Despite being frequently snowed in on our mountain this winter (a "bonus" we both enjoy), Paul and I recently had the experience of talking to a listening audience spread throughout southern New England. Through the medium of modern technology, we were guests on a radio program emanating from Rhode Island while sitting at our kitchen table. The topic we were asked to discuss was - you guessed it! **Hermits!**

Our preparation included doing a few statistics about **RB's** subscribers. Of our 600 readers, just over a half are women. Approximately 500 live in the USA, scattered across forty-seven states and D.C. Anyone care to guess which three states are not represented? A complete listing of states and numbers is posted on the Bulletin Board page.

In addition, **Raven** flies out to twenty-three foreign countries, most going the to English-speaking countries of Canada, the United Kingdom., Australia, Ireland and New Zealand. There are readers in nine other European countries, as well as in South Africa, India, Malaysia, Ethiopia and Papua New Guinea.

About three-quarters of our subscribers are living some form of eremitical life or hope to do so. It appears that our **Raven's Bread** "family" may be the largest listing of hermits world-wide, which listing, we hasten to add, is NEVER given out. Might it prove helpful to the eremitical movement if **RB** conducted a survey of its readers that provides data about how, where and why persons choose hermit life? (Anonymity guaranteed!)

What do you think? Would you be willing to participate if such a questionnaire were published in the May 2001 issue? If you have serious reservations, we invite you to let us know. Likewise, if you see benefits and have particular questions you think should be included, please contact us. Perhaps the beginning of the Third Millennium is a good time to check the pulse of the resurgent eremitical movement.

On this note of resurgence, the renewals by readers whose



# zzzz **Canonical Reflections** zzzz

*by Helen L. Macdonald*

*Researcher, Novalis, Saint Paul University,  
Ottawa, ON*

## **"DISCERNMENT" in A Commentary on Canon 603**

The right of admitting candidates to the eremitical state pertains to the bishop or his delegate. If the person asking for entrance to eremitical state has never lived as a hermit, the bishop might want to suggest that the candidate first live as a hermit for a period of time, perhaps for one year, and then return to the bishop and discuss the experience. If the experiment has proved to be positive, the bishop may decide to accept the candidate for probation or he may feel that further experience is necessary. If he has not already done so, the bishop may delegate a priest or religious to be in charge of any hermits in the diocese. This person would be responsible for verifying that all the requirements deemed necessary for the eremitical life in the diocese were met.

**Age:** There is no required minimum age for admission to the eremitical state but, while it is possible for someone to enter an institute of consecrated life after their seventeenth birthday, this would not be prudent for anyone entering the eremitical life. Each diocese may set its own age at which someone would be considered mature enough to enter but it would probably be unwise to accept anyone under the age of thirty.

**Physical Health:** A physical examination of the candidate is recommended to confirm the candidate's ability to withstand the eremitical life. Health insurance may be an important factor. Who will be responsible if the hermit becomes physically or mentally incapacitated? In the case of a handicapped person, it would depend entirely on the bishop whether or not to accept the person. Much would depend on the handicap itself, the possibility of future deterioration of health due to it, and also, the way the person has coped with the disability over a period of time.

**Free Status:** The candidate should show proof of baptism, confirmation and free status before being accepted by the diocese. In the case of a candidate who has previously been married, one must distinguish between those who have received a declaration of nullity and those who are still bound by a valid marriage. In instances of a former marriage, the candidate must demonstrate that the former spouse, who has lost his or her marital rights in both the civil and canonical forum, has renounced these rights in a valid, civil legal document. Proof should also be offered that any children have reached full legal status and are morally and financially provided for.

**Suitable Character:** The eremitic life demands psychological maturity and emotional stability so it would be wise to evaluate this before the candidate is accepted. Perhaps the most important factor to look for is common sense. A sense of humor would help also. Good judgement should be sufficiently reflected in external affairs. Any obligation, financial or otherwise, would, have to have been dealt with.

Spiritual Maturity: The hermit is expected to be spiritually mature before entering. There is no litmus test for spiritual maturity, especially that required for the eremitical life, and perhaps only the experience of the hermitage will determine this. A familiarity with the Bible, the writings of the Desert Fathers, liturgy, theology, and spirituality would be helpful but it is the prayer life of the candidate which is most important.

Formation: From ancient times, hermits have learned their way of life by imitating an experienced hermit. A non-hermit, no matter how holy, cannot speak with the same authority as a real one. Today, however, trial and error may be the only way for most hermits to learn. It was a favorite saying of the Desert that the cell would teach the neophyte all that was necessary. This is still true today. "The eremitical life begins in the heart of the hermit but is experienced only in the hermitage."

**(Condensed from "*Hermits: The Juridical Implications of Canon 603*, published in *Studio canonica*, 26, 1992)**

**There where clinging to things ends, there God begins to be.**  
Meister Eckhart

## zzzzzzzzzzzz**Must Hermits Work?**zzzzzzzzzzzz

*by Kenneth C. Russell*

*(Reprinted by permission from *Review for Religious*, March-April, 2000)*

Abba Serinus, who worked at a number of tasks, avoided the trap of failing to trust solely in Divine Providence by insisting that "in all these employments, if the hand of God had not sustained me, I should not have been fed." In the same vein, Silvanus is confident that as long as he does his part God will provide. Given the tendency of work to become a goal in itself, it is not surprising that when a monk asks Abba Biare what he must do to be saved, the elder advises him to reduce his appetite, dwell in his cell and reduce his quota of manual work.

Any kind of work can upset a hermit's life if it assumes too great a place in it. But certain kinds of work were regarded as essentially distracting. Agriculture per se was considered an exteriorizing activity that draws a monk's attention away from God. Even the gardening that is mentioned in the Sayings was suspect. It was, at best, on the borderline of the acceptable.

Underlying what we have seen so far concerning the eremitical understanding of work is the conviction that a monk should pay his own way and contribute to some extent to the welfare of others. But neither of these obligations demands that all monks must work. Some monks, surely, had the means to sustain their life without daily labor. A number could probably count on the support of their relatives and friends. Would this modest support not give them more time to pray and meditate? Why is work itself so important?

### **The Value of Work**

We must note, first of all, that living on any form of income other than daily labor is explicitly rejected in the Sayings. A monk who is disturbed by the haggling involved in selling his wares asks one of the senior monks whether he may give

up work if he finds another means to survive. The elder replies: "Even if you do have what you need by other means, do not give up your manual work." The monk is instructed, in fact, to work as hard as he can. This "word" is exemplified in the story of Abba Achilles, who edified his visitors when they discover that he has been working and meditating all night.

The Sayings generally do not emphasize the non-economic value of manual labor. They do, however, present work as a basic element of a hermit's life. Abba Pambo was held up as an example: "In (him) we see three bodily activities: abstinence from food until the evening every day, silence, and much manual work." When Poemen lays out the basics of the eremitical life for an inquirer, he begins by saying that "living in your cell clearly means manual work."

We know then that, according to the Sayings, work is an ascetical activity linked with meditation which should not be set aside even if other means of support are available. It seems clear, however, that manual labor was so tightly tied to economic survival in the experience of most solitaries that they felt no need to reflect in depth on the role it played in their lives. It was simply a fundamental but unobtrusive activity of their uncomplicated regime. To get deeper insight into the role that work plays in the eremitical life, we must turn to John Cassian.

Cassian takes Paul the Apostle as the exemplar of work. If Paul, who had the right to live off his mission, worked, how can monks refrain from doing so? Cassian quotes Paul's injunction to the Thessalonians to work with their hands and to be at peace. He sees manual labor as an antidote to distraction. Work concentrates the mind and shuts out external noise. It lifts the individual above the turmoil of the emotions. St. Anthony chides the healthy monk who lives off alms that should by right go to the weak. Astoundingly, he insists that everyone else in the world relies on the compassion of others "with the sole exception of monks who live by the daily toil of their hands." Anthony reminds us that according to tradition, the monk gives alms, he does not receive them.

**(To be Continued)**

**Topic for May 2001 Issue:  
Publication of Survey Questionnaire  
Send us your Comments, Ideas, Suggestions!  
Deadline: April 2, 2001**

## **Resources Available from *Raven's Bread***

*Readings in Spirituality - Annotated Bibliography* by Sharon Jeanne Smith **31pp. \$10.00**

*Solitude & Union: A Select Bibliography on the Hermit Way of Life* by Cecilia W. Wilms **26pp. \$8.00**

*Commentary on Canon 603 from "The Law of Consecrated Life"* by Jean Beyer SJ, 1988  
Translated from the French by W. Becker, 1992 **10pp. \$3.00**

*Hermits: The Juridical Implications of Canon 603* by Helen L. Macdonald, Researcher Novalis: St. Paul University, Ottawa, ONT **24pp. \$8.00**

*Notes to Guide the Beginning Hermit* by A Hermit of Mercy **15pp. \$5.00**

*Statutes for Hermits* by The Bishops of France (1989) **12 pp. \$4.00**

*Discernment Survey 1996* **6pp. \$2.00**

# Raven's Rest

## The Silence...The Solitude...The Solace of God...

Retreatants welcome to schedule time (starting April 1, 2001) at **Raven's Rest** Hermitage (a fully furnished apartment with kitchenette & private entrance) here at **Still Wood**. Offers opportunity to experience solitude and silence on a forested mountainside of the Newfound Range in the rural Smokies, approximately 35 miles N.E. of the Great Smokies National Park and 35 miles N.W. of Asheville. Spiritual Direction available upon request. Suggested offering \$20.00 per day includes meals. For further information, contact:

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### BOOK NOTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**Alone in Community - Journeys into Monastic Life Around the World** by William Claassen. *A first-person account of experiencing monastic life in sixteen communities within Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Coptic, Sufi, Japanese, Thai Buddhist, Jain and Hindu traditions.* 2000. Paper 280 pp. \$13.95. Forest of Peace Publishing, 251 Muncie Road, Leavenworth, KS 66048-4946. Tel: 800-659-3227

**Amazing Graces - Blessings to Season Your Meals** by Richard Gilbert. *Meal blessings to season plain-tasting food soulfully so eating becomes companionship with the ever-present Guest.* 2001. Paper 112 pp. \$10.95. Forest of Peace Publishing (see above).

**Letters from the Holy Ground - Seeing God Where You Are** by Loretta Ross-Gotta. *Earthy and self-revealing reflections that are signposts to the immediacy and accessibility of Holy Ground; written from Loretta's hermitage in rural Kansas.* 2000. Paper 216 pp. \$16.95 Sheed & Ward, 7373 South Lovers Lane Road, Franklin, WI 53132. Tel: 800-266-5564

**Wherever You Go, There You Are - Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life** by Jon Kabat-Zinn. *Provides access to the essence of meditation for both beginner and those wishing to deepen and expand their practice.* 1994. Paper 278 pp. \$11.99 Hyperion, 114 Fifth Ave. New York, NY 10011

**A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton** by Esther de Waal. (Photographs by Thomas Merton) *Meditations from the best of Merton's contemplative writings illustrated by his own striking black-and-white photos.* 1992 Paper 114 pp. \$10.99 Servant Publications, Dept. 209, PO Box 7455, Ann Arbor, MI 48107. Tel: 313-677-6490



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