



# ***Raven's Bread***

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

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### ***Vol: 2 No: 2 May 1998***

***Raven's Bread*** is a quarterly newsletter for hermits and those interested in the eremitical life. This 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:

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The annual subscription to the printed newsletter is \$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: [mailto: 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 on Solitude**

In November, 1997 at St. Andrew's Cathedral, Victoria, BC, Bishop Remi De Roo received the Renewal of Vows of Rev. Charles A. E. Brandt, erm. of Black Creek. "In a small way we are making history for the consecrated life," said De Roo with typical understatement. Father Brandt's vows as a hermit were taken under a section of Canon Law (#603) that was written following an intervention by Bishop De Roo at the Second Vatican Council in 1964.

Brandt has lived as a hermit priest in BC for 31 years. De Roo's intervention was made on behalf of Brandt and a larger colony of hermits who were living in the Courteny, BC area at the time. The Code of Canon Law published in 1983 included for the first time provision for hermits to exist in the Church.

In his intervention at Vatican II, De Roo stated, "The Latin Church is experiencing an ever-growing renewal of the life of hermits. It is urgent therefore that the Western Church officially recognize the life of hermits as a state of perfection." He expressed his conviction that the increase in interest in the eremitical life "indicates a special influence of the Holy Spirit who inspires initiatives beneficial to the Church and the modern world."

Remi De Roo also cited the "sanctifying value of the hermit's life," adding that the hermit fills a prophetic role in the church reminding us that "the building of an earthly city is not the final end of all things. Fleeing the noisy whirlwind of worldly activities, he opens his heart to the Holy Spirit in an atmosphere of calm and interior reflection. Thus he pursues an essential calling of the Church - the direct contemplation of God."

Bishop De Roo also sees an ecumenical value in the hermit's life. "The solitary life of the hermit seems to have known no decline in the East. Its restoration would enhance the vitality and inner integrity of the Western Church." Finally the bishop made the point that recognition of hermits would correct the impression that the practice of poverty, chastity and obedience is limited to those living communally in religious orders.

Born into a Lutheran family, Brandt later became an Episcopalian priest. His search took him into the Roman Catholic Church and eventually to New Melleray Abbey in Dubuque, Iowa. Discovering the eremitical roots of the Cistercians and the influence of Thomas Merton, he resolved to pursue a hermit calling.

Brandt joined the hermit community in BC in March 1965. "After I spoke with Remi De Roo, just back from Vatican II, about my call to hermit life and priesthood, he said that if I were accepted by the hermits, he would ordain me as a Roman Catholic priest. I was ordained in November 1966 as a priest-hermit- the first ordination of a hermit priest in the western Church for hundreds of years."

Thanks in large part to Bp. De Roo's prophetic intervention, Canon Law once again recognizes the oldest form of consecrated life in the Church.

**Excerpted with permission from: The Island Catholic News, February 1998.**

## A Word

### From

## Still Wood

The beauty of an Appalachian spring is celebrated in music, art, and poetry. Deservedly so! Each April I am overwhelmed by the wonder of fresh green carpeting the forest floor, bursting forth in fern and moss and lichen; then gradually creeping up the mountainsides as trees and shrubs bloom and leaf out. Even on this showery April day, a green glow suffuses the slopes beyond our deck.

Add to this the flashing of goldfinches, humming birds, nuthatches, rosy finches, and woodpeckers as well as the thronging colors of forsythia, redbud, crabapple, dogwood, service berry, magnolia, flame azalea, mountain laurel and rhododendron plus myriad other wildflowers ... It takes my breath away and defies my powers of description. You have to see it to believe it.

I experienced a similar sense of overwhelming riches as I assembled all the material for this issue of *Raven's Bread*. Everything was SO good, I was sorely tempted to expand the issue to include it all. As it is, I had to make some choices that were nearly as painful to me as pruning a forsythia in full flower. (I generally leave such operations to Paul to be done when I am not looking!)

I hope you will find much hope and nourishment in this issue which features personal stories and styles of hermit life as richly diverse as Mother Nature's springfest. My gratitude goes out to all who contributed to this issue's question about work within the framework of hermit life. I trust we will receive a similar response for the next issue's question about the indispensability of **play** in a balanced life of solitude.

This issue carries the last in the series by Fr. Jim Kennedy about "America's Desert Fathers." Paul suggests that we send forth a call for accounts of hardy, prayerful women who could qualify as "America's Desert Mothers." What about it? Know of any Mountain Mama's or Wise Women who dared the desert of solitude? We would like to feature some in future issues of *Raven's Bread*.

New subscriptions have been received from around the world so that we now have a network stretching from Thailand to Alaska. Since many first found *Raven's Bread* via our abbreviated web page version, we have felt it a service to the eremitical movement to continue on this electronic media. As more than one new subscriber has observed: "It is good to find something as soul-nourishing as *Raven's Bread* amid the trivia that abounds on the Web."

During this glorious season of Easter and Pentecost, let us celebrate the wonder of New Life around and within us. In contemplation of these great Mysteries, may Joy be your portion!

With Grateful love,

Karen

## zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz **Sounding Solitude** zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

I was born in "Tipperary so far away" more than a half century ago! Thirty-seven years ago, lured by the ideal of being a missionary in Africa in a community committed to the poor, I by-passed another inner call to be a Carmelite, and joined the Daughters of Charity in Dublin. (I remember saying compromisingly to the Lord: "I'll be a Carmelite when I'm fifty!")

The chance to be a "front-line" missionary came only in 1974 when I was sent to Ethiopia. That happened to be the year the revolution broke and the Communist system got going in Ethiopia. Twenty years living under that, trying to establish kindergarten education, especially in the interior of Ethiopia and Eritrea, working with famine and war victims, taught me what was 'real' in life. So the time came to do a U-turn in my life.

The Lord had not forgotten my "compromise" so when I decided to "dare the dream" I was sure it was to Carmel I would go. The Master had other plans! In 1994 I became a "nomadic" hermit in this diocese where I had worked since 1981. This sent shock waves of disbelief through family, community and friends. "No! No! She's not the type! She's too out-going, fun loving etc." Back home they thought the African sun had affected my reason! That is when they later heard I was staying on in Ethiopia as a hermit. Getting back to my Celtic spiritual roots in the British Isles or Ireland was understandable but · So I had a lot of pressure applied causing me to do a careful

discernment.

While the eremitical lifestyle is rekindling in the West after 300 years, it was never lost in the Christian East. Egypt and Ethiopia are the greatest centers in Africa where hermit life still flourishes in an unbroken tradition. Ethiopia has an estimated 7,000 hermits committed to radical asceticism. Indeed it has the "last remaining tradition of Christian eremitical asceticism in the world", to quote from a survey carried out in 1988-91 by Professors from Addis Ababa University with Drs. Kim and William Bushell, Columbia University, New York. This, of course, is within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

It still surprises me that our Ethiopian Catholic Church has neither a totally contemplative community nor its own hermits in such a sacral society! I am fortunate in having a Bishop who is interested and very supportive. Consequently, after four years' struggle, Bethany Hermitage was built, being blessed on July 16, 1997. That same day I pronounced vows (temporary) as a hermit in this diocese.

There is no social security, salary, insurance schemes nor retirement benefits for missionaries in Ethiopia. One must work for subsistence as best one can. I have a good vegetable garden, do some art and craft work, have some generous friends and am learning to live each day as it comes. This is within a rhythm of prayer, reading, work and Scripture study.

Now that the Communist era has passed in Ethiopia, the "hidden Empire" of the Spirit has emerged. The youth are avid for God. They are entering His service in all denominations. However, I feel our youth, especially young religious and clergy who tend to get neck-deep in activism, need a counter-image now. Thomas Merton calls it "contemporary violence · killing the roots of wisdom and peace."

Very convinced of this truth, I hope and pray that Bethany may be one small sign-post for them and be seen also as a little ecumenical gesture. After all, this calling of the hermit is trans-cultural, trans-continental, trans-divisional. It is older than most of the divisions.

So in this "13 months of sunshine" land, I'll re-write my "Song of Songs" while listening to "the music of the night".

*Sr. Helena Gormally*

*Bethany Hermitage, Kambatta, Ethiopia*

**Sit in your cell as in Paradise. Put the whole world behind you and forget it. Watch your thoughts like a good fisherman watching for fish. The path you must follow is in the Psalms - never leave it. Take every opportunity you can to sing the Psalms in your heart and to understand them with your mind.**

**The Little Rule of St. Romuald**

## *America's Desert Fathers*

*By*

*Fr. Jim Kennedy, Obl. Cam.*

Dominating the landscape near Las Vegas, NM is a double-domed mountain called Hermits' Peak. Some three hundred feet below the summit on the east side is a cave, the home in the 1860's of Giovanni Maria Agostini - the third of our American Desert Fathers. He was in his sixties when, having walked from Kansas City to Las Vegas, NM as part of a wagon train, he trekked a further 18 miles to find his solitude on what was then known as Cerro del Tecolote (Owl Mountain).

Giovanni Maria was born in 1801 in the Tuscan region of Italy, apparently the son of a nobleman named Mattias Agostini. One romantic version of his early life includes the information that he entered seminary but was seduced by "a bewitching dark-eyed and lustrous-haired beauty · and fell in a most earthly way!" Others say he left seminary because of his differences with church policy. What is clear is that he left Italy in 1827, having made a vow NOT to accept holy orders but to live as a solitary in the spirit of St. Antony of Egypt with private vows of chastity and poverty from which no one could release him.

He began his life as a wandering solitary by traveling from shrine to shrine throughout Spain. He wore a black hood and cape similar to that worn in choir by Carthusian novices which has led some to surmise that he tried his vocation with both the Cistercians and Carthusians.

In 1838, he sailed for Latin America seeking the "high mountains and vast deserts in order to enter fully into a life of perfect solitude." His search led him through Venezuela, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Peru. In Peru he lived for a time in a cave high in the Andes. Everywhere he went, he preached and catechized when permission was given by local bishops but steadfastly refused to accept holy orders "because my vocation called me to solitude, not to the exalted ministry of the priesthood."

Eventually he traveled (always by foot) through Central America and southern Mexico where he was expelled by the anti-clerical government of Benito Juarez. He went briefly to Cuba; sailed north to Quebec Province and then traveled through the U.S. By then he was a venerable old man in his 60's with a long white beard, a pilgrim's staff and bell, and still wearing his black capa and hood. Once in New Mexico, he wandered the small villages, giving advice and counsel, helping children with their catechism, and healing the ill and infirm with potions and herbs. Some legends even ascribe miracles to him. But the continuous press of people pushed him to seek greater solitude on Cerro del Tecolote. Friends built him a small cabin over a spring on the crest. However people continued to seek him out and he moved once more, 300 miles south to the Organ Mountains outside Las Cruces. There, too, he made friends and agreed to light a signal fire every 3<sup>rd</sup> night so they would know he was all right.

On the appointed night in mid-April, 1869 no fire was seen. A posse was formed which found Giovanni Maria, now 69, lying prostrate on the ground with a dagger in his back. They surmised he was killed while kneeling at prayer by someone who knew his habits. To this day, his memory is revered and the places made holy by his presence are reverently cared for. Twice yearly formal pilgrimages are made to the crest of Hermit's Peak (renamed in his honor,) near Las Vegas, NM.

#### Question for August 1998 Issue:

**What forms of relaxation and play do you find helpful in your hermit life? Do you have advice and/or personal experiences to share?**

***Please limit your response to 150 words or less so we can print as many as possible. Thanks!***

**Deadline: July 5, 1998**

## BOOK NOTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All our recommended books this issue are published by or available through **Forest of Peace Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 269, Leavenworth, KS 66048-0269. TEL:1-800-659-3227**

**The Further Shore (Essays on Renunciation Hindu Style)** by Abhishiktananda (Fr. Henry LeSaux,OSB). A "hermit bible" says one of our readers, who shared this quote: "As has happened in the past a genuine monastic renewal will follow in the wake of a renewed eremitical life."

**The Lively Garden Prayer Book** by William Cleary. *How do your zucchini and kohlrabi pray out there at night in the garden? Do you know about the Poison Ivy police? This is a delightful collection of light-hearted prayers and helpful hints for gardeners.* Paper 111 pp. \$11.95

**Tales of Hermit Uncle John** by Roger Robbenolt . *Stories which make you laugh or weep in turn as a heartsick boy and a wounded hermit heal each other.* Paper 199 pp. \$9.95

**The Old Hermit's Almanac - Daily Meditations for the Journey of life** by Edward Hays . *A wondrous mix of trivia, fantasy, and deep spiritual wisdom. I look forward to each day's entry.* Paper 400 pp. \$15.95

**Prayers for the Domestic Church - A Handbook for Worship in the Home** by Edward Hays. *An excellent prayer resource for all whose home is sacred space.* Paper 215 pp \$13.95

**Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim - A Personal Manual for Prayer and Ritual** by Edward Hays. *Contains Morning and Evening Prayer for every season and rituals to celebrate daily life.* Paper 224 pp. \$13.95



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