

Franciscan Solitude

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Contents

In the first section—**Early Eremitical Elements and Movements Preceding and Contemporaneous with the First Franciscans**—we attempt to give the reader a survey of early eremitism in order to better appreciate and understand Francis and Clare in their thrust for solitude. Having discovered a very rich tradition, we decided to include this material as historical background.

We begin with some biblical notions put forth by Martino Conti, OFM, scripture scholar and professor at the Antonianum in Rome. Then a few brief bridge notions about the postbiblical eremitical development are presented by the Austrian Johannes Fleischacker; Benedikt Mertens, OFM, from Mannheim, Germany, expands into the 11th century; Cinzio Violante builds on this foundation and brings the reader into the 12th century as well.

Because the Franciscan Movement has had a feminine component since its inception with the Lady Clare as well as lay people in the Order of Penitents (Secular Franciscans) joining Francis, we thought it would be appropriate to include research on the feminine hermit tradition. We conclude this section with a pair of articles by women on female hermits. Edith Pasztor, a colleague of Raoul Manselli, writes of the ideals of female eremitism in Europe from 1200 to 1500 while Giovanna Casagrande focuses on some forms of female solitary life in central Italy.

The Eremitical Experience of Francis and the First Franciscans

Our interest in Franciscan eremitism was deepened while we heard Lazaro Iriarte, OFM Cap., speak on the subject at the Capuchin Franciscan Institute in Rome. It was there he made the startling statement that Francis had founded no hermitages but had rather sought out solitary places for prayer. It was later Franciscan generations which called Francis's places of prayer "hermitages." Focusing on Francis's desire for solitude, we take a look at the eremitical experience of Francis and the first Franciscans.

Benedikt Mertens, OFM, provides a glimpse into "Solitude In Francis's Life." Then Martino Conti, OFM, takes a look at Francis' primitive solitude experience and apostolic choice. With clarity, Conti notes the balance Francis sought between the active and contemplative stances. Marcella Gatti, through her historical profile of the Carceri, gives a descriptive background of one of the places where Francis sought not so much to establish a hermitage as to find solitude among hermits. Finally, Mertens offers a concluding summary to this section.

Critical Text and Commentary

Guiding the reader through the third section—the "heart" of our anthology—we would like to make some suggestions by way of mapping out a possible route for both a casual and a more scholarly approach to the text. We include a lecture of Ignatius Brady, OFM, on the "Rule for Hermitages." Having come upon this lecture in the form of a cassette tape, we chose to transcribe it in its colloquial form so as to be faithful to the lecturer and offer it as a tribute to him for his contribution to Franciscan research and studies. We close with Mertens' conclusions concerning the eremitical experience of Francis and its connection with the eremitical tradition.

Further Historical Development of the Eremitical Experience in the Order after Francis

We view chapter four as a bridge between the eremitical experience of the first Franciscans as presented in the preceding three chapters and the experience of this eremitical document in our own day as presented in chapter five.

Aware of the complex historical developments in the eremitical experiences of the Franciscan Order down through the centuries, Costanzo Cargnoni enlightens us about *The Houses of Prayer in the History of the Franciscan Order*. Having given a definition of the overall meaning of the "Franciscan Houses of Prayer" and their relation to the reform movements, Cargnoni (relying above all on the studies of Dacian Bluma, OFM and Melchior de Pobladora, OFM Cap.) expounds his interpretation in four parts to show the historical evolution of the Houses of Prayer in the Franciscan Order.

The first part treats Franciscan Hermitages (13th-16th centuries) and their relation to the movement of the Spirituals, to those geographic areas of development, and to their spiritual content. Much is said about the rich experience of the Spanish eremitism of Peter of Villacreces.

The second part examines Houses of Gatherings (16th-18th centuries), the reasons for their rise, their general Statutes, their historical evolution, their structure and spiritual content and the method of teaching in character formation.

The third part examines Monasteries for Retreat (17th -19th centuries), which began with the “Riformella” of Blessed Bonaventure of Barcelona. Cargnoni insists again upon the “Spiritual Content,” with the intent of signifying by means of adequate, selected legislative texts, the active force of apostleship and prayer. He rewrites the nineteen suggestions of St. Theophilus of Corte for the superiors of retreats and touches upon the initiatives attempted by the Capuchins in the 18th century.

The fourth and last part relates the drastic experience of those living in deserts or in solitude (16th-18th centuries). These begin with St. Peter of Alcantara, Blessed Bonaventure of Barcelona, St. John Joseph of the Cross, and St. Leonard of Port Maurice. Many original texts are quoted which give us a better understanding of the spirit which inspired these strong contemplative experiences. It all serves to demonstrate historically that the Franciscan Rule, on which every experience of the Houses of Prayer pertaining to the Order is based, cannot be observed “spiritually” without the earnest desire to live a life of prayer and of contemplation.

Grado G. Merlo treats *Eremitism in Medieval Franciscanism* up to the 15th century, and Mertens arches over the remaining centuries to give us only a glimpse of this complex historical material.

In the fifth and final section we present some **practical applications**.

Our first example shows that the “Rule for Hermitages” can be lived and experienced almost anywhere, as it is in the heart of the inner city of the South Bronx, New York. The first article by André Cirino, OFM, outlines the entire “Rule” and how it was lived and experienced at the Little Portion Retreat House. Then in the next article, Sheila Patenaude, FMM, gives a reflection on the “Rule for Hermitages” as she first experienced it at the Little Portion, using the image of a pink magnolia tree.

Following our premise that this text can be lived and experienced almost anywhere, Helen Budzik, OSF, demonstrates how this eremitical experience can be shared with people of a parish community—a unique application. The Raischls open further creative applications of the hermitage “Rule” as they share their insights as a married couple who take up Francis’s invitation to solitude.

Two Third Order Regular Friars, John Kerr and David Liedl, share with us their construction of a simple hermitage structure (also in the shadow of a magnolia tree) in the South Bronx. Their local fraternity creatively integrated Francis’s brief document into their daily life.

In a most idyllic setting, the Syracuse Franciscans live as “resident” hermits with the “Rule for Hermitages” of Francis as their daily guide. In their article they give us a glimpse of their life.

Next, Franciscan Sister Mary Catherine Gurley, has gleaned a wide range of solitude experiences and shares them as personal reflections of her spiritual journey.

And last, our anthology concludes with the Lady Clare “speaking” through an article. André Cirino, OFM, writes about an experience at a monastery of the Poor Clares, showing from Clare’s writings and the Sisters’ way of life how they may have been guided by Francis’ text on solitude.