

Hermitage in the City

by

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Before the summer of 1980, I knew little about Francis's "Rule for Hermitages." During the Franciscan Study Pilgrimage at Assisi I was first introduced to the text and given a chance to live it for a few days in a hermitage at Colfano in the Province of the Marches. During the lectures and explanations of this "Rule,"² I began to see potential for living it upon my return to the United States. After returning to the States, I heard Dacian Bluma, OFM, give several talks on the "Rule for Hermitages." At that point, I was convinced that it was possible to experience this "Rule" right where I was in the South Bronx.

During the 800th centenary celebration of St. Francis's birth in 1982, the Friars Minor Province of the Immaculate Conception sponsored a project for the poor in the South Bronx, where the friars had labored for more than eighty years among Italian immigrants. The pastoral team of Our Lady of Pity parish offered the vacant convent as a retreat center for the poor and those whose ministry is with the poor. Retreats were to be offered free of charge. Soon after the dedication of this new ministry at the Little Portion, an opportunity was available to try living the hermitage "Rule." Our first experience was set for spring 1983. Four of us came together, two men and two women, and the Hermitage Experience of the Little Portion was born. (See Patenaude, *Pink Magnolias or Assisi Revisited in the Bronx*.)

The Hermitage Experience was rather simple. It unfolded as follows. The hermits usually gathered on a Friday evening. After an instruction on the content of the "Rule," a schedule was proposed for living according to it, and the hermits began to do this for the next three days. Civic holiday weekends were chosen since, with the addition of the Monday holiday, it was easy for people to be free to extend the Hermitage one more day.

Since the summer of 1980 I have had the opportunity to experience this "Rule for Hermitages" many times, both at the Little Portion and other places. I would like to share some of the insights I have gained.

1. Those who wish . . .³

I find that this aspect of voluntarily entering the hermitage sets the tone for the entire experience. I have gathered with many people to live this way, and the experiences have been blessed because the participants truly desired to be there. There is a sense of expectation flavored by enthusiasm and excitement.

. . . to dwell in a religious way in hermitages . . .

During the Franciscan Study Pilgrimage in Assisi, all the participants were assigned to hermitages which were on mountain-tops or in rural areas. So I was truly amazed to learn during our first Hermitage Experience at the Little Portion that our inner-city retreat house was very suitable for living this "Rule." I was further impressed by the comment of a Franciscan sister who works in a hospital in New York City: "We can do this at home!" Monthly days of recollection have been the routine for many religious communities. This sister saw the possibility of living according to the model found in the text during this monthly period of prayer.

. . . may be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be the 'mother' and have two 'sons,' or at least one.

With regard to numbers, the Little Portion had thirteen bedrooms or cells. We have had as few as four and as many as seventeen gather for a Hermitage Experience. With the four it was clear—two were “mothers” and two were “sons.”⁴ For the seventeen, I made adjustments. Since our hermitage stay at the Little Portion was so brief, each person who signed up was automatically a son/Mary. Of the seventeen, three were mothers/Marthas, and each mother assumed this role for four or five participants. This worked very well. It was not only Franciscans who were hungry to learn about and experience this. Others who do not belong to the Order and knew little of Francis and less of Clare came to the Franciscan Hermitage Experience and picked up the flavor and rhythm of it all in a short time.

Someone goes into a hermitage for solitude. And we have Francis talking here about three or four brothers. This is because Francis wanted people to be together in solitude—to be in fraternity like the rest of the Order. It is this notion of fraternity that distinguishes the Franciscan “Rule for Hermitages” from any other experience of solitude, such as quiet days, poustinia, desert days, and the like. Although there is silence during the days of hermitage, participants remark that they are aware that brothers and sisters are “walking this hermitage road” with them. In moments of difficulty, fraternity brings a security in prayer; in moments of joy, it reaffirms their commitment to be part of a Franciscan fraternity. In such a small house (the building was a four—story tenement), people seemed to find space for solitude, which—to judge from their comments—they were happy to share.

2. Let the two who are ‘mothers’ keep the life of Martha . . .

I assumed the role of Martha with one or more persons, depending on the size of the group. The ratio was usually one Martha to three or four Marys. I have discovered the role of Martha to be an exhausting one, not only from the viewpoint of preparation for prayer and Eucharist, but also because of the work in the kitchen, dining room, chapel and other areas. So usually we were two, sometimes three Marthas. I would invite someone to be a Martha only after he/she had experienced the role of Mary. Because the Martha role is so demanding, I think it is important for the Martha to understand the needs of the Mary by being a Mary first. Comments from various Marthas who have served at the Little Portion verified this for me.

. . . and the two ‘sons’ keep the life of Mary (cf. Lk 10:38-42) . . .

The first, early friars were itinerants. Although we may not be literally on the road, the intensity of our activity usually keeps us “on the go.” We need time just to be (stare), like Mary to sit at the feet of the Lord to do the “‘one thing required’” (Lk 10:42). I encouraged the hermits to assume the role of Mary even to the point of asking them simply to move from the table after eating and to leave all utensils there. Some people who came for this experience found this deactivation very difficult—they were so used to “doing.” So we exaggerated a bit to encourage them to take the time for just “being.”

. . . and have one enclosure in which each one may have his cell in which he may pray and sleep.

The early friars had stone caves or cells/huts made of twigs and mud. Our cells at the Little Portion were very simple – a bed, a chair, a lamp, a table with a Bible on it. Many hermits who came to the Little Portion were exhausted people; so they did take significant rest in their cells. One hermit, a wife and mother, recorded in her journal as she awoke the first day: “8:20 A.M. –strange, no reason to rush. To be on God’s time—to wake when God wakes me.”

During another hermitage experience, a sister shared with us that it was a new experience for her to observe this part of the hermitage text—to pray in her cell. She was more accustomed to community prayer, praying in chapel or a church. After hearing this, a friar decided to try the same thing. He spent the next day entirely in his cell in prayer. With no phone, no work, no personal items, he witnessed to us that he was able to let himself “get cornered by God.” He was pleasantly surprised with this experience.

3 . . . and strive to maintain silence . . .

I had discovered this to be a crucial part of our experience at the Little Portion. Silence was observed all day. At lunch and supper, music was played. The silence seemed to become a pregnant experience for the hermits, stemming in part from the atmosphere of fraternity. During the day God moved the hermits. They might have wanted to share their experience with someone, but they held it in silence. So I included a sharing time for the hermits at the end of each day. They could bring all of the experience of silence to birth during the period of sharing. The amazing result was to witness how deeply the details of this simple text became incarnated in each of them.

... and seek first the Kingdom of God and His justice (Mt.6:33).

John Gallen, S.J., once reminded me that the Kingdom of God was not necessarily a place, but an experience of the God who dwells in unapproachable light, who unfolds before us and is revealed to us. And I think that this was experienced by the hermits as they assumed the stance of Mary before God. They search for God. God unfolds before them, and they experience the kingdom that is within.

Moreover, the South Bronx is a place where justice needs to be upheld. St. Bonaventure says justice "makes beautiful what had been deformed."⁵ I think that a region like the South Bronx, so pervaded by violence, poverty, and suffering, was in some way made beautiful by the presence of the hermits who gathered at the Little Portion to live this "Rule."

4. And let them recite Prime at the proper hour ...

It is in this "Rule for Hermitages" that an early example of a schedule of the daily life of the friars is found. At the Little Portion the "Rule" was lived as written, with the sole exception that all the liturgical hours were not recited. In the short time span of three days, praying all the liturgical hours together would leave little time for personal prayer. In his Letter to Leo—at times called the "Gospel of Franciscan Freedom"—Francis told Leo: "In whatever way it seems best to you to please the Lord God and to follow in (God's) footprints and ... poverty, do this with the blessing of God and my obedience."⁶ Taking my cue from this thrust of freedom, I would suggest, in my explanation on the first evening, the following schedule to the hermits, which every group accepted and lived:

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| 9:00 A.M. | • Morning Prayer |
| 12:00 P.M. | • Lunch |
| 4:00 P.M. | • Eucharist |
| 6:00 P.M. | • Supper |
| 7:30 P.M. | • Evening Prayer |
| 8:00 P.M. | • Sharing |

Attendance at any scheduled function was completely voluntary. This is supported by Dacian Bluma's comments on the liturgical hours:

From the simplicity of the "Rule for Hermitages" some things are not clear. For example, were the hours prayed together? Did everyone have to come? If you were having an ecstasy, did you have to leave that and come? Did they have a bell rung so as to come out of their caves, cells, huts? Did the mothers say the hours with the sons? And the brothers who prayed the Office of the Our Fathers, where did they fit in? Very likely, they arranged things for themselves by mutual agreement.⁷

Although this little writing of Francis makes no mention of the Eucharist, we celebrated Eucharist each day during the Hermitage Experience. It was around 1222 that papal approval was given for Mass to be celebrated in private oratories. The friars probably celebrated Mass in the hermitage, because Thomas of Celano says: "One day therefore he went before the holy altar which was erected in the hermitage where he was staying. ..."⁸

A final note on scheduling: I would mention to the hermits that God might call them in the middle of the night to prayer. I would encourage them to respond, and many have done so.

... and, after Terce, they may end their silence, speak with and go to their 'mothers.'

I would tell the hermits at the beginning that this was not a directed retreat, that I would not be meeting with them during the day. I did not encourage sessions for spiritual direction, counseling, or the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. If someone asked for a session for whatever reason, however, I did accommodate. This stance preserves the time for them to live the solitude they seek in silence.

As mentioned already, we gathered for sharing for about an hour at the end of each day. Besides building up the hermits' faith, it was a chance for the fraternal aspect of the text to be experienced by all.

5. And, when it pleases them, they can beg alms from them as poor little ones out of love of the Lord God.

The seeking of alms was a practice of the entire fraternity. When food did not come from their work, they went out to beg from the table of the Lord. Francis included this begging idea in the hermitage text, possibly to keep the friars in touch with the rest of the fraternity. At the Little Portion, there was no begging of alms for food, but our meals were simple. If hermits desired to fast, I asked that they inform their mother/Martha so as to assist us in planning for meals. One friar who came from a community of more than fifty men remarked that most meals he ate at the friary were on the fast-food style. Slowing down his pace as a hermit and eating in silence introduced him to the food he was eating, leading him to praise God for these simple sustaining gifts of creation that he had previously ignored.

6. And afterwards let them recite Sext, None and, at the proper hour, Vespers.

As already noted above (number 4), we did not pray all the liturgical hours. On a longer Hermitage Experience, e.g., eight to ten days, additional liturgical hours other than those scheduled could be added. In our practice at the Little Portion, we left as many hours as possible for personal prayer.

7. And they may not permit anyone to enter or eat in the enclosure where they dwell.

Francis usually advised the friars to plant a hedge around their huts when they erected a hermitage. During the entire time of hermitage, the Little Portion was closed to all other activities. This formed a "hedge" around the entire building. The slamming of a door or laughing aloud in an ordinary greeting could disturb this silence and distract the hermits. Thus silence pervaded the entire hermitage area.

8. Let those brothers who are the 'mothers' strive to stay far from everyone and, because of obedience to their minister, protect their 'sons' from everyone so that no one can speak with them.

As one of the mothers/Marthas, I spent my time in the front office by the door and the phone. I had to protect some of the sons/ Marys from business calls as well as from people trying to drop in for a visit with a hermit.

9. And those 'sons' may not talk with anyone except with their 'mothers' . . .

I assigned a mother/Martha to each hermit on the first night so he or she knew with whom they could talk. This was a happy arrangement because the listening and chores were shared by all the mothers/Marthas.

10. The 'sons,' however, may periodically assume the role of the 'mothers,' taking turns for a time as they have mutually decided.

In the short time we had for a Hermitage Experience at the Little Portion, this switch was not made. An exchange should take place during a longer period of time, or in response to the needs of the hermits themselves.

Conclusion

Francis established a rhythm for his life: he was on the road for a period of time; then he would spend a period of time in hermitage. Although we seem largely to have lost this sense of rhythm in the Order today, I think it is very possible for us to re-establish it on the local fraternity level.

For example, I think that members of friaries/convents with an extra room could actually create a hermitage room and give the members of the fraternity the possibility of living the "Rule for Hermitages" on a regular basis. Each member of the house could be given the opportunity of taking a hermitage day (overnight) on a regular (weekly/monthly) basis. The hermit could enter this cell early in the day, join the fraternity for prayers, Eucharist, and perhaps the evening meal. Although one could fast or take meals in silence, the one meal taken with the fraternity could be the one time they could go and speak with their mother (the fraternity). For any specific needs that may arise, members of a fraternity could alternate the Martha role.

Once a fraternity has received some instruction on the "Rule for Hermitages" and lived it for several days, I think the rhythm Francis knew as an itinerant preacher could again become our experience today. I believe it is worth a try.

Endnotes

This article was originally published in the March, 1986, edition of *The Cord* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute), pages 89-96.

Lectures and explanations of the "Rule for Hermitages" were given during the "Assisi Experience" by Damien Isabell, OFM; Aaron Pembleton, OFM; Roch Niemier, OFM; and Murray Bodo, OFM.

"Rule for Hermitages" *Gospel Life* 62—63.

Throughout this article I use the expression sons as it occurs in Francis's text. I mean sons/daughters, for such was our experience.

St. Bonaventure, *Collations on the Six Days*, First Collation, 34.

Armstrong and Brady, "A Letter to Brother Leo," 48.

Dacian Bluma, OFM, "The Rule for Hermitages," a talk given at the Franciscan Gathering at Tampa, February 7, 1983. (Cassette Enterprises, 1112 Park St., Seffner, FL 33584).

I Cel 92; *Omnibus of Sources*, 307.