

Preface

Margaret Carney, OSF
President St. Bonaventure University NY

In the concluding words of the Earlier Rule, Francis prays:

And I ask God that He who is all powerful, Three and One, bless all those who teach, learn, retain, remember, and put into practice all these things, each time they repeat and perform what has been written here for the salvation of our soul, and to love deeply, to guard and cherish them.

I believe that we have witnessed in recent decades many epiphanies of Franciscan consciousness that arise from individual and corporate dedication to the task Francis described in the words above: “teach, learn, retain, remember. . . .”

It is not the province of the classroom lecture (teach) alone to produce a renewed reality of charismatic initiative. It is the result of actually living again—retaining, remembering, practicing—the Life and Rule that Francis engendered. It is the determination to cherish, guard, love deeply the life expressed in the Rule so that it becomes incarnate again with the light of Christ’s power and presence. Something so loved and cherished attracts others and creates a circle of influence that may, at times, appear almost magical in its properties.

This kind of determined exploration into the profound meaning of traditions and texts—texts that are the results of living, not the dry bones of archaic recollection—has resulted in the publication of this anthology, *Franciscan Solitude*. André Cirino and Josef Raischl have journeyed not from theory to experimentation, but conversely, from personal involvement in hermitage experiences to studious reflection on its meaning for today’s Franciscan family.

Their research is a form of servanthood. They have taken a theme of intense personal interest and experience; and worked hard to explain it by scholarly research and written evaluations of serious pastoral experimentation.

The short, almost cryptic, “Rule for Hermitages” that forms the heart of this collection (chapter 3) is an example of the rediscovery of a whole way of Franciscan Gospel living that has been unknown by generations of Franciscans. Franciscan scholarship brought this text back into prominence thirty years ago. Works included here by Kajetan Esser and Ignatius Brady witness the restoration these eminent leaders effected in their writing and teaching, and allow us to delve deeply into the “innards” of the text itself.

Hardly had this little Rule found its way into collections of Francis’s writings published after Vatican II, when original and ingenious attempts to experiment with its contents began to emerge. The appearance of the “Rule for Hermitages” was matched by the emergence of religious sensibility in the West that sought to restore ways of praying in solitude. Franciscans who were part of this movement founded ritiros, houses of prayer and hermitages. Some of these brothers and sisters had little explicit awareness of the deep historical and theological foundations upon which they were building. Nonetheless, they intuitively sought ways to introduce an eremitical element into personal and communal prayer life. The fifth chapter of *Franciscan Solitude* chronicles several of these honest and ordinary “experiments” that have contributed greatly to our knowledge. The projects described demonstrate the daily effort to put into practice this marvelous legacy.

As those who attempted these projects shared their successes and failures, continued study emphasized the solitude experience as central to the life and mission of Francis. The entries in the first two chapters offer ways of understanding the historical underpinnings of the hermit life that attracted him. The editors have gathered rich examples of reflection and historical documentation on this ancient form of Christian life and its medieval expressions. Articles by Conti and Mertens focus more precisely on the particular stamp which Francis placed upon the hermitage tradition. We are coming to appreciate fully Francis’s remarkable amalgamation of prayer in solitude and in a fraternal, relational context.

A variety of interests is served by special studies. Gatti’s intriguing investigation of the property rights and politics of the Carceri through the years will delight history buffs. Pasztor and Casagrande invite us to glimpse the world of the medieval women hermits, thus enlarging our grasp of early feminine Franciscanism. Conti stresses the contemporary theme of evangelization and its rootedness

in the hermitage spirituality. The Raischls offer a wonderfully innovative approach for married couples who want to savor this Rule.

Each writer allows a unique perspective to emerge. Confirmation of efforts to restore the hermitage ministry to a central place in our lives is one by-product of careful reading. Another benefit is a renewed enthusiasm for the task of finding means to translate the genius of the early Franciscan movement into meaningful paradigms for a postmodern Christian diaspora. The applications of the "Rule for Hermitages" to modern people and places has become an exciting locus of the powerful blessing Francis envisioned for those who would dare to repeat and perform what he had prescribed.

This last assertion is based on personal experience. During the time in which this publication was developing, my own congregation took the bold step of inaugurating a hermitage ministry. Over the last twenty years several of our members asked for the establishment of a hermitage on our convent grounds. Others, lacking an opportunity at home, received permission to spend lengthy periods in hermitages operated by other religious groups. Finally, we found means to build three small hermitages in a pine woods on our Mt. Providence campus. André Cirino assisted us by providing a workshop on the hermitage tradition for both architect, Richard Keller, and contractor, Steve Catranel. These men caught the infection of our enthusiasm and built simple but durable and comfortable dwellings for women and men in search of solitude.

Since the inception of the ministry we have had an enthusiastic response from the people of the Pittsburgh area and beyond. Most heartening to us has been the eagerness of local lay persons and Protestant clergy to avail themselves of this oasis of contemplation. Thus we feel deeply joined to this renaissance of the eremitical aspect of our vocation.

Weekly I rejoice as I see the light of a hermitage burn in the scented darkness of our woods. I remember the potent benediction of Francis. My heart reaches out to all those who likewise labor in projects such as this volume to refound our charism in its fullness. May the readers of this publication become part of the refounding energy that binds us to one another as we put into practice all these things.