

The Rule for Hermitages

for Married Couples

by

Bernadette and Josef Raischl

Translated from the German by
Bernadette and Josef Raischl and André Cirino, OFM

Francis's way of living the Gospel attracted people from all levels of society to his new movement, so that in the early years lay women and lay men, both single and married, sought to join him. The Secular Franciscan Order was born among lay people who through the centuries have walked in the footsteps of Francis and Clare. So it would not be extraordinary to speak of married couples adapting the "Rule for Hermitages" to their lives in the world.

Francis was born into the family of Pica and Pietro Bernardone, where he lived with one sibling, Angelo. The sources paint Pica as a loving, caring mother and Pietro as patriarch of his clan. One can imagine Pica protecting her two sons as they grew up in Assisi at the close of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries. From this very family structure we already have overtones of the first verse of the "Rule for Hermitages" in which Francis employs the images of mothers/sons. It is significant to note that as Francis looks to the family model when he writes his words about solitude, he does not choose "patriarch" or even "father." He chooses the maternal image to convey more of the fraternal closeness he desires for his family.

Our family at the present time is the same as the Bernardones: we, Bernadette and I, have two sons, Jona and Elia. I, Josef, am a social worker with Hospice in the city of Munich and Bernadette is a nurse on leave from her job while nursing Elia and caring for the boys. Bernadette has been in training for dance therapy for almost four years. Our family life keeps us constantly on the move to the point that at times we find ourselves meeting in the city of Munich to transfer our children to the other as one finishes work and the other moves on to a course or work.

Right after Elia's birth in 1993, we found ourselves exhausted and in desperate need of space and quiet, "desiring . . . peace of spirit."¹ We could say with Bonaventure, we were "seeking this peace with panting spirit."² So like Francis, who sought solitude on mountain tops (LaVerna) or near lakes (Lake Trasimeno), we withdrew for four days to a beautiful house run by the Sacre Coeur Sisters near the Bavarian Sea bordering the Bavarian Alps. We left Jona with his cousins and took Elia with us since Bernadette was still nursing him at that time. With the hermitage text as a guide, we share our experience.

¹Endnotes

St. Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, ed. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) Prologue 2 (p. 60).

²Ibid.
/ *The Rule for Hermitages for Married Couples*

1. Those who wish to dwell in a religious way in hermitages may be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be the ‘mother’ and have two ‘sons,’ or at least one.³

The most important reason for us to seek solitude these days was to have time just *to be*, allowing each other some time alone while alternating the care for our son Elia. In the Latin version of the “Rule” Francis uses the verb *stare*, conveying the meaning of being or simply taking a break from one’s daily way of life, and in that sense to live and spend time in solitude. During our first day in the quiet we simply wanted “to land.” Since a great amount of our energy goes out to our children, we decided we would spend some time praying and thinking about our direction with them.

We began our reflections by looking back upon our history. Before the conception of our son Elia, we had suffered a miscarriage. Taking some clay, Bernadette shaped it into a coffin, and this coffin became our cradle for Christmas. Through the use of clay and paint we began to see God’s creative energy at work within us, especially in our giving birth to new life—our second son Elia.

The first part of the text speaks about “three brothers or four.” This worked well for us as a couple, with the Sisters caring for other needs. We plan in the future to invite at least one other married couple so as to allow us even more time in the role of Mary.

2. Let the two who are ‘mothers’ keep the life of Martha and the two ‘sons’ keep the life of Mary (Cf. Lk. 10:38-42) and have one enclosure in which each one may have his cell in which he may pray and sleep.

Since we were in the role of Mary, our stance emanated from our experience. Bernadette is a professional dance therapist. She decided to use dance as a means to demonstrate our development as a couple with special emphasis on our relationship. The movement of the dance, supervised by God’s loving care and goodness, was insightful, thrilling, and exciting for us.

Our children became part of our contemplative gaze. We took turns caring for our younger son Elia. Rather than keeping us away from God, our boys, Jona and Elia, share their contemplation in the way they play and simply stay with toys or things. They teach us every day how to contemplate; they seduce us, too, just *to be* with them. So we brought paint and clay with us for our contemplative time.

As mentioned already, the Sisters served as Marthas in all that was necessary for our stay in their beautiful house, taking special care of the meals, the house, and the lovely garden. The old, bent tree of their garden, with its deep roots and branches stretching wide towards the sky, spoke to us of “being” and simply “letting go.”

While the Sisters were the primary Marthas, admittedly the alternation of our son Elia was another aspect of this active role. The alternation gave the other contemplative time and space. With older children, we would opt for a longer time of solitude.

3. And let them always recite Compline of the day immediately after sundown; and strive to maintain silence, recite their Hours, rise for Matins; and seek first the Kingdom of God and His justice (Mt.6:33).

³“Rule for Hermitages,” Gospel Life

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

In the morning and evening, we would share some prepared prayer times together, by reading and singing. (Francis mentions the *Liturgy of Hours* in this verse as well as in verses 4 and 6.)

Verse 3 mentions the word “silence.” Being married and having a young family, this aspect of our life is precious and taken whenever circumstances allow. We experienced a most profound silence in the solitude of the nearby forests and lakes. We walked this area about two hours each day. We drank in the silent beauty of the trees, birds, paths, the fresh mountain air, and the crystal-clear lake waters. All of this brought us in touch with the God who saves, the God of life, the very life which is given to each one of us on our journeys and in our relationships.

Francis uses only one verse of Scripture in this writing, Matthew 6:33: “Seek first the Kingdom of God.” As a married couple with children, we see this verse preserving this document from becoming too rigid, since the demands of life for married couples are different than those placed on celibates. We see a baby’s needs as synonymous with the kingdom’s presence. We have Jesus’ statements in mind: “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them. The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”(Mt. 19:14). And in response to the question: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus called for a little child to come and stand among them. Then Jesus said, ‘I assure you, unless you change and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of Heaven. Those who make themselves as humble as this child are the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven.’”(Mt. 18:1-4)

4. And let them recite Prime at the proper hour and, after Terce, they may end their silence, speak with and go to their ‘mothers.’

While we came apart primarily for the silence and solitude, we took Francis’s option to speak not only with our mothers who served us, but also to share together during the day so as to discern God’s movement both in our personal, individual lives and in our marriage. We learned once again that communication is vital to all human relationships, especially that of marriage. In our daily struggle to coordinate our needs with the needs of our children, we are constantly threatened with foregoing personal communication by yielding to the demands of hyperactivity. The hermitage experience helped us deepen the nature of our marital communication.

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

In coming to the Sacre Coeur Sisters’ house, we came as poor little ones in need of the silence and solitude which they provided. With a family it takes much planning to withdraw this way. Needless to say, the results enhanced and strengthened us as a couple.

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

Living in a hermitage experience for these four days took us away from the daily activity of our work and from distractions such as the telephone. We were enclosed in the silence/solitude of the lakes and mountains, reading what St. Bonaventure calls the “Book of Creation.”

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.

One of the fruits of our experience of solitude has been brought back home with us. We invited people from the parish to join one of us for a morning of contemplation before going to work. The arrangement is very simple: one of us enters into silence for thirty minutes with our guests in our basement, waiting for God to touch our hearts. The other’s task is to prepare breakfast for the children while “protecting their sons” (the people at prayer) in the basement from any disturbance.

9. And those ‘sons’ may not talk with anyone except with their ‘mothers’ and with the minister and his custodian when it pleases them to visit with the Lord’s blessing.

In the future, if we should be able to repeat this experience with other married couples, we could alternate the Mother/ Martha role for preparation of meals, prayers, and care of children or infants.

10. The ‘sons,’ however, may periodically assume the role of the ‘mothers,’ taking turns for a time as they have mutually decided. Let them strive to observe conscientiously and eagerly everything mentioned above.

The silence/solitude, even though it had to be interrupted by taking turns with our son Elia, drew us closer to the Center. Since the exchange of roles is part of our daily experience, caring for Elia did not interrupt our quiet stance. The difference during these days was the silence we could anticipate once we exchanged roles with each other.

As a conclusion to our reflections on this experience, we realize how much we value time and space for silence, solitude, and simply being before God. We are searching for like-minded people to accompany us on our journey. Our contemplation time at home with other parishoners is one way we are exploring the possibilities. The memories of all God did and showed us during our four days encourage us to continue seeking God’s face in solitude.