

The Spirit in Contemporary Culture

HERMITS AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Recovering an Ancient Vocation

Carol McDonough

IN OCTOBER 2014, His Holiness Pope Francis wrote a letter establishing the Year of Consecrated Life which, he says, ‘concerns not only consecrated persons, but the entire Church’. His aims were ‘to look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion, to embrace the future with hope’.¹ His comments have particular relevance to those called to the recovered ancient tradition of lay and consecrated eremitic life.

For at first the vocation to express through one’s life the eremitic tradition begun by St Anthony of the Desert² was a predominantly lay movement, attracting a few priests and scholars. There are still many Christian lay hermits, including Roman Catholics, around the world living the vocation—privately, in vows or not in vows.³ But in the Roman Catholic Church, recent canon law, encyclicals and the Catechism have created new opportunities for hermits and solitaries to live either under

With thanks to all hermits, and to those who write about hermits, and to my advisers, Dr David Gormley-O’Brien, Br Dr Camillus Parkinson and Mark Slattery.

¹ Pope Francis, apostolic letter, ‘To All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life’, 3.2, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacra.html, accessed 20 December 2014.

² See ‘St Anthony of the Desert’, in *New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia*, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01553d.htm>, accessed 20 January 2015; William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2004); Alexander Ryrie, *The Desert Movement: Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2011); and my own ‘Christian Hermits and Solitaries: Tracing the Antonian Hermit Traditions’, *The Way*, 54/1 (January 2015), 76–89.

³ For discussion of the distinction and place of lay and consecrated hermits in the Roman Catholic Church, see Therese Ivers, ‘Why Become a Canonical Diocesan Hermit?’ (July 2008), available at <http://doihaveavocation.com/blog/archives/108>, accessed 20 January 2015.

the authority of a bishop or in obedience to a specific religious order or institute.

After the near-disappearance of visible hermits in the West between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁴ hermit-priests slowly returned during the early twentieth century, often struggling to obtain diocesan permission to test, then continue living, this difficult vocation.⁵ Even into the late twentieth century, the capacity in the Western Churches to understand and to hand on the Antonian eremitic traditions remained variable, whereas in the Orthodox communions the cultural transmission was continuous from the fourth century.

Within the Roman Catholic Church two eremitic orders founded in the eleventh century, the Carthusians and Camaldolese, have always continued to welcome validated vocations. During the twentieth century the eremitic charism of the Franciscans and Carmelites, both founded in the thirteenth century, was recovered and new eremitic communities were formed under new enabling canon law. Before John Paul II's 1996 apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata*, which explicitly recognised the eremitic vocation, some religious left their communities in order to become



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Hermits' cells at Camaldoli

⁴ See Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914); Jeremy Hall, *Silence, Solitude, Simplicity: A Hermit's Love Affair with a Noisy, Crowded, and Complicated World* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2007); and Isaaco Turina, 'The Hermit's Knowledge', available at conference.fdvinfo.net/rc33/2004/Data/PDF/stream_02-10.pdf, accessed 20 March 2010.

⁵ See McDonough, 'Christian Hermits and Solitaries'.

intentional solitaries. Later, orders created places for religious hermits who could remain members of their order or institute. Eremitic traditions were recovered slowly by those persons in the Western communions actually experiencing, or affirming by researching, this strange call: bishops, priests, monastics and laity; scholars and canon lawyers.

It was the lives and writings of such people that provided sufficient impetus for the issue to be raised at Vatican II; and, in 1983 the enabling 'Eremitical Life' canon (603) was legislated in the Code of Canon Law, under 'Norms Common to All Institutes of Consecrated Life'.⁶ Those of Christ's faithful who are called to eremitical living are enabled by it to 'withdraw further from the world and devote their lives to the praise of God and the salvation of the world through the silence of solitude'.⁷

In *Vita consecrata*, John Paul II wrote:

It is a source of joy and hope to witness in our time a new flowering of ... *men and women hermits*, belonging to ancient Orders or new Institutes, or being directly dependent on the Bishop, bear[ing] witness to the passing nature of the present age by their inward and outward separation from the world Such a life 'in the desert' is an invitation to their contemporaries and to the ecclesial community itself *never to lose sight of the supreme vocation*, which is to be always with the Lord.⁸

And the 1992 *Catechism* states:

Without always professing the three evangelical counsels publicly, hermits 'devote their life to the praise of God and salvation of the world through a stricter separation from the world, the silence of solitude and assiduous prayer and penance'.

They manifest to everyone the interior aspect of the mystery of the Church, that is, personal intimacy with Christ. Hidden from the eyes of men, the life of the hermit is a silent preaching of the Lord, to whom he has surrendered his life simply because he is everything to him.⁹

The newly enacted canon and explanation in the *Catechism*, together with affirmation in Vatican documents such as *Vita consecrata*, have authorised diocesan bishops to consecrate canonical diocesan hermits and

⁶ *The Code of Canon Law* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983), nn.573–606, available at http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG0017/_PIX.HTM, accessed 12 July 2012.

⁷ *Code of Canon Law*, n.603.

⁸ John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, n.7.

⁹ 'The Eremitic Life', in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Chapman, 1992), nn.920–921. available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P2A.HTM, accessed 10 March 2015.

anchorites, whether lay, diocesan priest or former religious—after rigorous testing of the sense of call, long formation and ecclesial approval of each one's rule of life.

The Vocation

Before its disruption by the eremitic call, the former life, formation, work and service of these hermits may have been in any of the life paths of laypeople (single or married), priests or religious. As Jesus taught: 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' (John 3:8) So it appears with everyone moved by 'the spontaneous and surprising increase in solitary vocations'.¹⁰ There are now all kinds of Roman Catholic hermits, some dependent on their bishop, some members of orders or institutes, others living in a parish, usually in ordinary homes, hidden and unnoticed, faithfully living out their intimacy with Christ for Church and world. Discussing how women, in particular, are re-embracing solitude, Bernadette Flanagan notes:

In the expressions of new monasticism ... the eremitical strand is well represented ... deeply inspired by the life of the third-century desert hermits, since the anonymity that their desert hermitages provided [is] equally available ... in the immensity of the modern city.¹¹

The testing of an eremitic vocation includes not only discerning the general qualities emergent or existent in the person being tested and formed towards eremitic consecration, but also noticing how life's former joys fall away, to be replaced with desires for solitude, simplicity, and inner attending and responding to God. This 'falling away' is one sign of a contemplative solitary vocation. The changes in someone's inner life as it deepens into God, as well as the person's outer orientation and behaviour, are tested with a priest, spiritual director or religious community.

For diocesan priests, the call will be tested with the bishop. Some may be enabled to live the eremitic life after testing without taking the vows of canon 603; others may be received under the canon at their own or the bishop's call. Some may become a hermit-priest guest of, or live 'behind', a religious community on their property. A few diocesan priests have

¹⁰ Hall, *Silence, Solitude, Simplicity*, 87.

¹¹ Bernadette Flanagan, *Embracing Solitude: Women and New Monasticism* (Oregon: Cascade, 2014), 15. See also Kristin Aune, 'Feminist Spirituality as Lived Religion: How UK Feminists Forge Religious Lives', *Gender and Society*, 29/1 (February 2015), 122–145.

pioneered new eremitic communities, some of them erected as Religious Institutes of Diocesan Right.¹²

For religious (including priests), the call to solitude and deeper prayer may be able to be lived within existing vows and obedience, with the agreement of the community leadership and chapter. If their order or institute is unable to accommodate a solitary vocation within the current expression of its founding charism, the situation may lead to exlaustation (permission to live outside the community, either retaining or relinquishing vows and obedience). Some former religious have been re-received under canon 603. Religious who are being allowed to embrace solitude are following the formation pathway directed by St Benedict in the fifth century: communitarian formation through monastic living followed by eremitic living, the path of his 'second kind of monk'.¹³

For laypeople, discernment may unfold over many years. Their primary formation will have been through secular life; their secondary formation will be into the eremitic vocation, however determined in a diocese. A person with a proven eremitic vocation may ultimately remain in the private domain, with or without vows, or may make simple promises at a parish Mass. To become a canonical hermit, he or she must be accepted and consecrated at Mass under canon 603 by the local bishop. Or the person may be received, formed and consecrated within the requirements of an ancient or recent religious eremitic order; or, remaining lay, he or she may request and be allowed to live near or in an order or institute, participating in sacraments and liturgy. Lay hermits and those consecrated under canon 603 invariably have to negotiate and provide their own means of support, shelter and income, however.¹⁴

The Six Ways of St Anthony in the Modern World

For five decades, St Anthony practised localised and travelling ministries balanced by deep withdrawal. In the present day, not only lay and consecrated hermits, anchorites and solitaries, but also many called into God-led ministries, in the Church and in and for the world, discover and

¹² An Institute of Diocesan Right is one that 'remains under the special care of the diocesan Bishop' (*Code of Canon Law*, n. 594).

¹³ St Benedict, 'Prologue', *The Rule of St Benedict: In Latin and English with Notes*, translated and edited by Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1981), 20.

¹⁴ Currently, the most useful collation of preparatory documents and resources for those believing they are called and are aspiring to reception under canon 603 is Marlene Weisenbeck, *Guidebook to Eremitic Life* (La Crosse: Diocese of La Crosse, 1997). It may be available from the diocese.

practise this same rhythm. Gospel listening and loving withdrawal for times of solitary communion with the Trinity enable them to remain grounded and refreshed for effective, listening and loving 'outer' ministry.

As a very young man, St Anthony first tested his call to contemplation and to solitude, for fifteen years living near a holy man, or Abba, on the edge of their village, Coma.¹⁵ He left the Abba to enter complete solitude, 'doing good in silence',¹⁶ his 'second way', for twenty years. For some modern hermits, this rare, reclusive, hidden path may become an intensive formation phase, its carefully discerned years chosen by God, as they 'face the terror and roughness'¹⁷ of the inner way (*forum internum*)¹⁸ in God. Others may find that their solitary and reclusive vocation has become their service till the end of life, fully given to God in intercession for the Church and world.

Aspirants demanded that St Anthony hand on what he had learnt and tested in eremitic life. This led to his third, and quite unexpected, way. He left the life of endless solitude, finding that he could now live an integrated, inner solitary communion among people, welcoming and teaching spiritual seekers hungry for guidance about living into loving relationship within the will of God. He himself became an Abba. The recovery of the Antonian desert traditions today, fully lived out by hermits and explored in scholarship incorporated into the formation of spiritual directors, gives us access to Antonian spiritual riches. Nevertheless, conversations taking place on the internet suggest that, especially for solitary lay hermits, there is still some lack, after initial discernment and formation, of focused, ongoing eremitic formation. The vocation to solitude clearly requires remaining in the discipline of spiritual direction. The pattern of daily life (*horarium*), including participation in the sacraments and the life of prayer, dwelling-place, appropriate means of frugal but sufficient financial support, social engagement and 'outer' ministry, must be carefully discerned in a continuous process throughout the course of a life.

¹⁵ An Abba or Amma is a holy man or woman living in solitude and silence in communion with God, sometimes forming disciples.

¹⁶ North American Jesus Caritas Communities, 'The Spiritual Family of Brother Charles', available at <http://www.brothercharles.org/wordpress/literature/2-the-spiritual-family-of-charles-de-foucauld/>, accessed 19 December 2013.

¹⁷ Simon Holden, 'Discernment of Vocation to the Solitary Life', in Maggie Ross, *Pillars of Flame: Power, Priesthood and Spiritual Maturity* (London: SCM, 1987), 206–207 (appendix B).

¹⁸ See Pius XII, *Provida mater Ecclesia*, n. 14, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19470202_provida-mater-ecclesia.html, accessed 20 January 2015.

As some of the spiritual fathers and mothers of the present day who are companioning and forming both aspirants and those with confirmed vocations, they express Anthony's fourth way: a more structured living out of the Abba-disciple relationship underpinned by formation in practical life (work), spiritual life (prayer as duty of service) and social life (*caritas* ministry and recreation). Anthony's own work in the fourth way involved direct Abba-disciple teaching, commissioning others as Abba, delegation and supervision, and writing. Today the Antonian traditions may be handed on one-to-one, but also through other means such as books, e-mail, social networking and internet conversations. Some modern-day hermits, usually taking part in the ministry of accompaniment as well, are involved in leadership of the charism, both before and while living the eremitic vocation. Some have worked at the recovery of the charism and its traditions, acting as beacons through writing and other media. Some are found as the spiritual guides or companions of other aspirants and mature hermits. Some have founded new eremitic communities, or have worked within their orders at re-evaluating and reclaiming ancient, lapsed eremitic forms within their founding charisms.

**Reclaiming
ancient, lapsed
eremitic forms**

Anthony's fifth way was a travelling ministry of encouragement to solitary and coenobitic hermits across great distances, with periods of stationary solitude between those of ministry and engagement. This ministry is reflected in the practice of travelling, teaching hermits in our own time, such as Richard Rohr. From his hermitage, known as East of Eden—to the east of his Franciscan community's house—Rohr shares his rhythm of life:

When not on the road, I myself live as a solitary ... with the full blessing of my Franciscan superiors and a bewildered comprehension from bishops These times are always, without doubt, my great spiritual breakthroughs This stripped-down, silent, stark, sensate and oh-so-simple life seems to be saying ... 'All is from God. All is toward God. All else is not God.'¹⁹

Finally, Anthony's sixth way exemplifies the critical need for justice activism and the encouragement of Christian endurance in protests for human rights and freedom of worship. The tradition of Christian justice

¹⁹ Richard Rohr, 'Foreword' in Paul and Karen Fredette, *Consider the Ravens: On Contemporary Hermit Life* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 2008), xvi.

activism is rooted in St Anthony's own actions (themselves inspired by the lives of the biblical prophets and Jesus himself), prompted by the love of God, of people and of creation. Following Jesus, all around the world, many Christians are committed justice and environment activists, including hermits and contemplative solitaires.

Hermits and Anchorites Today

The ministries and missions of the worlds' hermits are rich indeed. The visible signs of hermits' lives today include the occasional news report about their consecrations, but also web resources and printed materials by and about them. These hermits live as solitaires or in eremitic communities, each in a modern form of Abba/Amma–disciple relationship lived through spiritual accompaniment and direction. They express in their vocation journeys one, usually more, of Anthony's 'ways', not necessarily recognised as such by those inheriting them. We cannot hear the words and the prayer of the hundreds of hidden, silent ones, for few write about prayer and the life of prayer hidden in God.²⁰ Here are a very few of the living Roman Catholic canonical consecrated hermits' stories, from all over the world, in their own words and those of researchers and reporters.

Fr Eugene C. Romano

In the spirit and lived reality of the desert eremitic communities founded at St Anthony's direction, Eugene C. Romano has been described by his bishop as a modern-day Desert Father. A diocesan priest from New Jersey, USA, he became the founder of the Hermits of New Bethlehem, a canonical Association of Diocesan Right. He has attracted many aspirants. All the novice and diocesan consecrated hermits, men and women, live, pray and work in hermitage, as did the desert hermits in the third century. Fr Romano is their Abba, commissioned by his bishop, who accepts their obediences under canon 603. Each hermit has a unique rule of life, but all share the common times specified.

All are accompanied in their inner journey into love by Fr Romano, who wrote the diocesan-approved mission statement by which they live:

We are called to live in the mysteries of Christ, hidden in His wounded Heart before the Father. We live an eremitic, contemplative, sacrificial

²⁰ An exception is André Louf; see *Teach Us to Pray: Learning a Little about God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974) and 'Solitudo pluralis', in *Solitude and Communion: Papers on the Hermit Life*, edited by A. M. Allchin (Oxford: Fairacres, 1977), 21.

life ... in the silence of solitude, separated from the world (in order to be more present to its spiritual needs), and consecrated by public vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.²¹

Like the ancient desert aspirants, they are being fed and formed in Antonian gospel ways. Fr Romano writes:

The prayer of silence of solitude becomes an effective door to the healing presence of God in this physical and spiritual environment. Solitude means being alone, with the Alone, but only in silence can solitude be maintained.²²

Close by, on land given to them by the Hermits of New Bethlehem, live the Hermits of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, for whom Fr Romano is the visiting hermit-priest. Founded by a former Carmelite nun, these hermits in community have recovered the founding eremitic tradition of the Rule of St Albert of Jerusalem (1206–1214). After rigorous testing, they were received under the Prior General of the Order of Carmel. Through their stories, theologies and practice, nurtured by a true son of St Anthony, both communities articulate and give clear witness to Antonian eremitic traditions.

Sr Carol Raffaella of the Crucified Christ

Often the only glimpse that the rest of the world sees of one bound to God for life under canon 603 is the moment of consecration. In June 2010, Carol Prevedello, ‘a thoroughly 21st century hermit’ living in the suburbs, was consecrated before Bishop Julian Porteous in New South Wales, Australia.²³ It was a ‘lightning bolt moment’ when she discovered from a Tasmanian hermit, a former Carmelite, that it would be possible to live this life fully devoted to God and also to care for her sick mother: ‘I think it was always in me. When I was a teenager, I used to say to my mum, “I could go up a mountain and never come back down again”.’

²¹ Eugene C. Romano, ‘Mission Statement’, Hermits of Bethlehem in the Heart of Jesus, available at <http://www.bethlehemhermits.org/mission-statement/#sthash.BdRkMwHi.dpuf>, accessed 10 June 2012. See also Bernadette McNary-Zak, *Seeking in Solitude: A Study of Select Forms of Eremitic Life and Practice* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014), 87–101, and Eugene C. Romano, *A Way of Desert Spirituality: The Plan of Life of the Hermits of Bethlehem*, Chester, New Jersey (New York: Alba House, 1998).

²² Eugene C. Romano, ‘Desert Experience’, available at <http://www.bethlehemhermits.org/desert-experience/>, accessed 10 June 2012.

²³ ‘The 21st Century Hermit Devoted to God’, *CathNews* (27 September 2010), available at <http://cathnews.com/archives/cath-news-archive/5389-feature-the-21st-century-hermit-devoted-to-god>.

She lives her life by strict rules approved by Cardinal George Pell. Her day starts before dawn in prayer; she attends daily Mass and prays continuously throughout the day. Talking as little as possible in order to attend to this inner prayer in Christ, she limits her contacts to her family and a very few friends, unless she believes she is led by charity or necessity.

Fr Eugene Stockton

Eugene Stockton, another Australian, whose life's work has been described as 'a gift to the nation',²⁴ also began by asking himself: 'How does a lay person balance the demands of work and family with the solitary vocation?' He concluded:

In fact I came across those who do so successfully, and there was no doubting their grace of solitude and their effective management of life's demands. Just as Orthodox theology speaks of transfiguration of the mystic one can also say that for the mystic the environment itself is transfigured. Teilhard de Chardin called it the divine milieu: our natural environment now seen to be charged with Christ. By faith, we find Christ in all about us, in the heart of matter, in the heart of the other.²⁵

Stockton's research about lay hermits clarified his own hermit-priest call. As for so many other Australian later-life solitary hermits, Stockton's childhood spiritual journey began in deep solitude, in an intimate cultural relationship with the natural environment, which remains at the heart of his communion with Aboriginal spirituality.²⁶ 'I spent much time in the bush ... unnoticed ... unbeknown to others The bush is challenging. The bush is not beautiful in a sense, it's quite disturbing, and I think it stirs something up inside us.'²⁷

²⁴ Anne-Maree O'Beirne, 'Eugene Stockton: A Life's Work: A Gift to the Nation', *Catholica*, available at http://www.catholica.com.au/gc0/eds/015_eds_210814.php, accessed 10 March 2015.

²⁵ Eugene Stockton, 'Lay Hermits', *Compass*, 34/2 (2000), 46–50, available at <http://www.hermitary.com/articles/stockton.html>, accessed 20 February 2011.

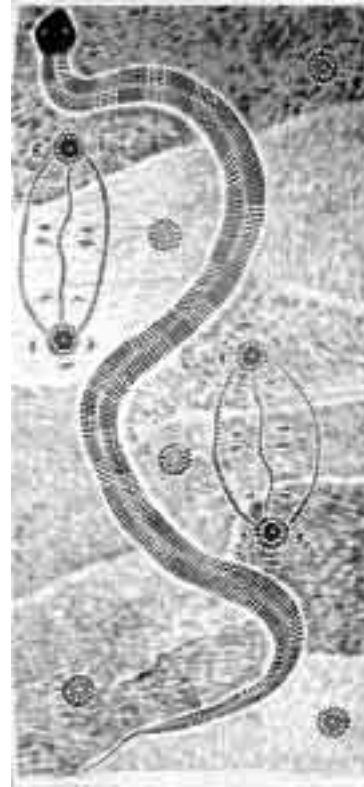
²⁶ See Eugene Stockton, *Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation* (Alexandria, NSW: Millennium, 1996); Eugene Stockton, 'Mysticism in the Australian Environment: Calls to a New Consciousness', *Compass*, 36/4 (Summer 2002), available at <http://compassreview.org/summer02/3.html>, accessed 3 March 2015; Eugene Stockton, *Wonder: A Way to God* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls, 1998); Eugene Stockton, 'The Dreaming in Australian Aboriginal Culture', *The Way*, 40/2 (Spring 2000), 148–156.

²⁷ 'Wellspring: A New Australian Spirituality', produced by Geoff Wood and Rachael Kohn, *A Spirit of Things* (ABC Radio National, Sydney, 7 November 2004), transcript available at <http://www.abc.net.au/>

This theme of the country, which is integral to Aboriginal cosmology and spirituality, is an important context for Australian desert eremitism.²⁸ There are other hermits who write of a deep connection to ‘country’, exploring the landscape and their sense of place through a Christian cosmology indebted to the Aboriginal one. The Irish expatriate hermit-priest Dan O’Donovan reflects on Aboriginal Rainbow spirituality, intertwining his Christian path with the ancient path of the country where he has made his home since 1972, bringing together his own Celtic heritage of place with the Aboriginal heritage of ‘country’: ‘Spirituality is theology lived out’.²⁹

Because of all the cultural distortions, misconceptions and projections that surround the word ‘hermit’, even though he is a canon 603 vowed Roman Catholic hermit-priest in the desert tradition, Stockton advocates using the term ‘forest dweller’ rather than ‘hermit’ (he lives in the forest himself, in the Blue Mountains). The ‘forest dweller’ tradition is ancient in Russian Orthodoxy and, as he says, it is also the third stage of life in Hinduism.³⁰ He writes:

I am able to fulfil the spiritual aspirations of my young days: seeking to live with God alone and for God alone. I can face up to death in a robust healthy way. The consecration, vows, and plan of life make



Aboriginal Rainbow Serpent

radionalational/programs/spiritofthings/wellspring-a-new-australian-spirituality/3436804#transcript, accessed 19 July 2011.

²⁸ See Blue Mountains City Council, ‘Aboriginal Cultural Protocols’, available at <http://www.bmcc.nsw.gov.au/download.cfm?f=85BCAA90-FB1C-CE0E-8B01CA70D211BD17>, accessed 10 March 2015.

²⁹ Dan O’Donovan, ‘The Beyond Is Near: A Rainbow Spirituality’, available at <http://www.wontulp.qld.edu.au/newsletters/occasional-paper-1.pdf>.

³⁰ The millennia-old *Dharma Shastra* details life as progressing from youth—*bramacharya* (training)—to adulthood—*grihastha* (work for the world as a householder)—to the senior years—*vanaprastha* (retreat for the loosening of the social bonds)—and old age—*sannyasa* (renunciation and expectant awaiting of freedom).

what is already a way of life into something more definite and concrete and committed. It completes my priesthood.³¹

Fr Charles Brandt

Fr Charles Brandt, now in his nineties, has been a solitary hermit-priest for six decades, and also an archive conservator, artist, justice and environmental activist, and writer. He lives in Oyster Creek, Vancouver Island, Canada, where he is involved in conservation work, seeking to keep the creek waters unpolluted and preserve their biodiversity. He is described as a quiet, scholarly man; he was Church of England hermit in the 1950s, then a Roman Catholic Cistercian monk, then, from 1967 onwards, a Canadian Roman Catholic diocesan hermit-priest. He writes in his book, *Meditations from the Wilderness*:

I am interested in conservation on three levels: restoring and preserving man's contemplative spirit—mine and other people; restoring what flows from man's spirit—what he creates from his ink or crafts; and restoring and preserving the earth. If we don't do this, we have nothing.³²

Brother Dismas Mary of the Cross

In January 2010, in Gambia, Brother Dismas Mary of the Cross, formerly a US aid-worker, was the first diocesan lay hermit to be received under canon 603 in Africa:³³

I had been on home leave in the US when God called me to his service (in a most dramatic way) and on my return ... I immediately resigned. When they asked why and I explained, they went into fits of laughter and asked how it was possible for God to call such an obvious sinner as myself.³⁴

In his *Blue Hermit* blog he reveals, 'my life is dedicated to prayer, contemplation and caring for the sick poor who come to the hermitage

³¹ Eugene Stockton, 'Forest Dweller', available at http://www.hermitary.com/articles/stockton_forest.html, accessed 10 May 2011.

³² Charles Brandt, *Meditations from the Wilderness: A Collection of Profound Writing on Nature as the Source of Inspiration* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1997); also see his speaker's biography at http://www.comoxvalleynaturalist.bc.ca/guest_speakers/2007/charles_brandt.html, accessed 10 March 2015.

³³ See <http://brotherdismas.blogspot.com.au/p/consecration-and-final-vows-pictures.html>, accessed 20 January 2012.

³⁴ Quoted in Augustine Kanjia, 'Gambia Gets First Hermit', *The Point* (20 January 2010), available at <http://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/article/gambia-gets-first-hermit>, accessed 2 December 2011.



© Br Dismas Mary of the Cross

Brother Dismas at his consecration

daily'.³⁵ He begs for resources for these people, and posts prolifically to the blog with reflections based on the liturgical calendar, as well as answers to e-mail queries, teaching and thoughts on eremitism.

Sr Laurel O'Neal

Sr Laurel O'Neal Er.Dio. is a diocesan solitary hermit in the USA, a Doctor of Theology and spiritual director who was consecrated in 2007 when she also started her informing, nurturing and feeding blog, *Notes from Still Song Hermitage*. Answering reader questions, she describes the interior journey and its interface with the outside:

In some ways the hermitage supplies an essentially tranquil context for the deeper struggles for becoming a truly human being Here one works on the destruction of any discrepancy between role and identity and learns to be truly transparent, both before God, oneself, and to the degree that it is prudent and pastoral, with others.³⁶

O'Neal is a founder member of the very small Network of Diocesan Hermits:

³⁵ See <https://www.blogger.com/profile/11039356620884066542>.

³⁶ Laurel O'Neal, 'On Struggle, the Peace of Christ, and Authenticity in Eremitical Vocations', available at http://notesfromstillsong.blogspot.co.uk/2011_03_01_archive.html, accessed 3 March 2015.

A support and resources network for Catholic hermits who are professed according to canon 603. Members reflect a variety of backgrounds, gifts and nationalities and our spirituality represents a contemporary expression of the desert tradition. Through the Network we hope to raise awareness in the Catholic Church of our unique vocation which we acknowledge as both a responsibility and a gift.³⁷

Sr Janet Strong

Like Laurel O'Neal, Janet Strong, also from the United States, uses her internet presence to emphasize that hermits are not recluses but engaged with the world as each is permitted under an approved rule. Strong, whose theology is Franciscan-formed, has been a consecrated diocesan hermit for thirty years. She describes her vocation on LinkedIn:

My vocation is to pray for peace especially for those who measure their safety by how far the violence is from them. The violence can be either exterior as in the case of so many wars, violence by drug cartels, uprisings, gender violence and religious violence that is seen in our world today or it can be the inner violence that we do to ourselves in many forms. Secondly, I also accompany those who are seeking a deeper relationship with God and give individually directed retreats.³⁸

Fr Nicolas Buttet

Formerly a lawyer and politician, the French hermit-priest Nicolas Buttet is now an academic, author, community leader and spiritual director. He became a lay hermit between 1992 and 1997, writing reflectively about the eremitic way of life. Since these years of isolated solitude, Buttet has become a generative and pioneering community founder, while maintaining the inner, communing solitude out of which his ministry emerges. In 1998 he created the Eucharistein Community, which engages in a variety of ministries and has a charism of open welcome for addicts. Buttet was ordained in 2004, inspired by John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*. In the same year, he founded the Philanthropos Institute of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Headed by a cardinal, the Institute seeks to provide for students 'an integrated vision

³⁷ Network of Diocesan Hermits, at https://groups.yahoo.com/group/network_of_diocesan_hermits, accessed 20 January 2012.

³⁸ See <https://www.linkedin.com/in/beitmery>, accessed 10 March 2015.

of Christian anthropology in light of the challenges confronting the human person in contemporary society'.³⁹ Its offshoot, the Ecophilos Foundation, aims to gather corporate representatives to 'to take a truthful look at the human person at work'.⁴⁰ He still writes and publishes frequently, often in collaboration, and is the spiritual director of the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.

Mary Kloska

'My sister is a hermit. No, she's not shy. I don't mean that.' Mary was consecrated in a small Polish Catholic Church in the USA after studying theology at Notre Dame University in Indiana, and being an aid-worker in Siberia and Asia.

Her life became a search for 'Him whom my heart loves' (Song of Solomon 3:4). She was consecrated in 2011 on the Feast of St Monica (mother of St Augustine of Hippo). At the Mass, the bishop said:

We have great reason to rejoice, for Mary becomes the first professed hermit in the diocese Mary embraces a station of life where she separates in some ways from the world to be more united with the Lord Jesus.

Encouraging her assembled family he continued, 'Be assured we can still talk to her, but most of her day will be spent in prayer'. For Mary,

... only by spending such time with Jesus could He begin to fill my heart with His Love, a Love bigger than this world's notion of 'love', a Love willing to endure suffering and death. This was the sort of Love He wanted for me to share with the world.⁴¹

Hope for the Future

Over forty years ago a historic meeting took place between the Popes of the Holy See of St Mark of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church and the Holy See of St Peter of the Roman Catholic Church. The debt that all Christianity owes to Egyptian Christians of eremitism and of monasticism, of both eremitic and coenobitic origins, was acknowledged.

³⁹ Yves Semen, 'Qu'est-ce que l'humanisme chrétien?', available at http://aes-france.org/IMG/pdf/AES_Yves_Semen_.pdf

⁴⁰ See http://www.ecophilos.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47:vision&catid=35:intuition&Itemid=27.

⁴¹ All quotations from Theresa Thomas, 'My Sister the Hermit', *Integrated Catholic Life*, at <http://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/2012/01/thomas-my-sister-the-hermit/>, accessed 20 June 2012.



Philotheos, a Coptic hermit monk, in his cave near St Anthony's monastery

Two decades later, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III⁴² spoke of the fruit of the 'still, small voice' of sixteen centuries of Egyptian monasticism.⁴³ He explored how the hermit traditions of St Anthony—first documented by one of his papal predecessors, St Athanasius—have persisted through the centuries, transmitted to each aspirant disciple by each Abba and Amma formed in Christian holiness.

We don't oblige any monk to lead a certain life. For he who wants to live in the monastery as part of the congregation, that is all right. If he wants to lead a life of solitude inside the monastery, that is all right. If he wants a cell of solitude outside the monastery or on the near hills, that will be all right. He who wants to live in a cave will have the permission to live in a cave. We have all kinds of monasticism.⁴⁴

We have seen that in the twenty-first century there is 'the joy and hope' of the full flowering of all kinds of monasticism, and eremiticism, in the Roman Catholic Church as well. In May 2014, Pope Francis spoke extemporaneously to some consecrated persons, echoing the words of John Paul II:

⁴² His Holiness Pope Shenouda III was the 117th Coptic Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of all Africa on the Holy See of St Mark the Apostle, 1971–2012.

⁴³ Shenouda III, 'Monasticism in Egypt', address given at the opening of *A Still, Small Voice: Sixteen Centuries of Egyptian Monasticism*, Washington National Cathedral, 15 March 1992, <http://www.coptic.net/articles/EgyptianMonasticism.txt>, accessed 6 August 2014.

⁴⁴ Shenouda III, 'Monasticism in Egypt'.

The consecrated life may experience further changes in its historical forms, but there will be no change in the substance of a choice which finds expression in a radical gift of self for love of the Lord Jesus and, in him, of every member of the human family How can we not recall with gratitude to the Spirit *the many different forms of consecrated life* which he has raised up throughout history and which still exist in the Church today? The choice of total self-giving to God in Christ is in no way incompatible with any human culture or historical situation.⁴⁵

As he has reminded us in this Year of Consecrated Life: 'Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone.'⁴⁶

Carol McDonough was placed on the Victorian Honour Roll of Women for her human services innovations in juvenile justice and community mental health. Earlier, she was on the academic staff at Australian National University and other tertiary institutions. A rural solitary, she is completing her book from her research into contemporary hermits in the Eastern and Western ecclesial communions at the University of Divinity, Australia.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, n. 3.

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, 'To All Consecrated People', 2. 2.