



Raven's Bread

Food for Those in Solitude

Vol: 5 No: 2 May 2001

Raven's Bread is a quarterly newsletter for hermits and those interested in the eremitical life published by Paul and Karen Fredette. The newsletter seeks to affirm and support this way of life. ***Raven's Bread*** is a collaborative effort and thus depends on the shared reflections, stories, news, notices, letters, and information from hermits themselves. The ***Raven's Bread*** Web page is an abbreviated version of our full newsletter, which also includes a **Bulletin Board** and **Reader Forum**.

Please send your written contributions, as well as address changes and subscriptions to:

Raven's Bread
18065 Hwy 209
Hot Springs, NC 28743

The annual subscription to the printed newsletter is \$8.00 in USA and \$10.00 US currency for foreign subscriptions. (Drafts drawn on US banks are the most convenient form of payment by foreign subscribers.) Any extra donations will be used to subsidize subscriptions for hermits who cannot afford the full cost.

To E-mail ***Raven's Bread*** directly click on this link: fredette@nclink.net

Raven's Bread (formerly ***Marabou***) derives its name from the experience of Elijah, the prophet, in 1 Kgs. 17: 1-6. A raven, sent by God, nourished him during his months of solitude at the Wadi Cherith (the Cutting Place).

Thoughts in Solitude

Translated by: Dr. John Pestian, Loveland, OH

What is silence? How do we become silent? In up-coming issues, RB will be publishing summaries of conferences by a man whose religious profession included silence. He was a Camaldolese Hermit who had a fifty year silent and prayerful journey. It was a journey that saved the spiritual lives of many by prayer and counsel; a journey that impacted physical lives by heroically resisting the Nazi Gestapo. He has since passed into God's Great Silence, but his words on silence given to fellow Hermits have been preserved.

WHY BE SILENT?

To become men and women of prayer and of God, we must give up everything. No conditions may be placed upon God's action in our lives, nothing held back. All that is in us must be brought into silence, and only then will we be free for God and for the needs of others. Silence is not an end in itself but a means to something greater.

Silence is compatible with action. It cannot remain empty and must be filled with something more, such as prayer, the study of Divine Revelation, or prayerful work. God is infinitely silent and infinitely active. All depends on Him. With infinite love he takes care of all -- in silence.

Silence is compatible with joy. Silence should make us joyful. It is a bad sign when silence makes us sad, when we begin meditating on the complaints of our fallen

nature instead of on God and His infinite love.

Our Blessed Mother is the singular and most perfect example of Christian silence. Only a few of her words are preserved. United always with God, her eyes and heart were open to the needs of others. She is the perfect contemplative, adoring God in silence and pondering all things in her heart.

God loves silence. The mystery of the Incarnation was accomplished in silence. In the Eucharist, Christ is silently present, ready to console and help all those who come to Him. In silence we adore God and are united with Him; in silence we pray and offer ourselves for the salvation of many; in silence we learn how to patiently bear with insults and offenses.

In the next few issues, we will study silence: silence of the physical and spiritual senses. Such silence was preached and practiced by the nameless Camaldolese who will be our teacher.

A Word from Still Wood

Joys and blessings in our Risen Savior! We greet you as Miss Spring shilly-shallies her way onto our mountain. I am looking down on our terraced garden bed where coral red tulips are slowly lifting their heads after being battered by a recent snow storm. A month ago, following an early preview of summer, our golden crocuses were buried under two feet of white stuff. After melt-off, they stood up again, stout as soldiers. Do not underestimate the Courage of a Crocus!

This delay of spring reminds us that we failed to forewarn our US readers that we were changing over to bulk mail rates in order to contain postage costs. As a result, **RB** took longer to travel to your homes and hermitages. A goodly number of you contacted us, concerned about the non-arrival of our little black bird by mid-February. We apologize for distressing you ... although it pleased us to learn that **RB** is so eagerly anticipated!

In this issue, we are asking your cooperation in assessing the status of the eremitical movement at the start of this twenty-first century. Would you take a few minutes to respond to the survey on pages 3 and 4? Then detach it and return it to us. **Raven** reaches over 600 readers world-wide and could well be the most comprehensive forum serving hermit life today. Your cooperation will ensure a more accurate delineation of the eremitical movement than we have had since its resurgence in the mid-twentieth century. We may also be able to discern future directions, as well as address the current needs and desires of those living in solitude today. Again, we assure you of anonymity and promise that you will be fully informed of the results. Please send in your completed surveys by June 15th at the latest so we can compile the results in time for the August issue. Thank you!

Thanks to all who have renewed their subscriptions, often adding that little extra which helps us continue this ministry and the services we offer. For your convenience, we have developed a different method for tracking subscriptions. You will note a date in the right-hand corner of your address label, e.g. 5/01. This date indicates when your renewal is due. However, if you are unable to afford the cost just let us know and we will be happy to keep you on the mailing list. **Raven** gladly offers its "bread" to all who desire it!

The discussion topic for our next issue was proposed by one of our readers. "Who are the people who most influenced your choice of an

eremitical vocation?" This should evoke some lively and interesting responses! **Deadline: July 1, 2001.**

Let us continue to support one another in prayer, especially during this joyous Paschal Season!

**With Grateful love,
Karen & Paul**

The 2001 Survey of Raven's Bread Readers

If you are interested in participating in our reader survey, survey forms are available to our online readers upon request:

By Mail to Raven's Bread 18065 Hwy 209, Hot Springs, NC 28743

By Telephone 1-828-622-3750

By E-Mail: fredette@nclink.net

zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz The Hermitage Garden zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz

By Virginia Leach, Twin Falls, ID

I was puzzled and somewhat disturbed by the second paragraph in Kenneth Russell's article "Must Hermits Work?" (***RB February 2001***). He states that:

"Certain kinds of work were regarded as essentially distracting. Agriculture per se was considered an exteriorizing activity that draws a monk's attention away from God. Even the **gardening** that is mentioned in the Sayings was suspect. It was, at best, on the borderline of the acceptable. (*italics mine*)"

What first came to my mind upon reading this was the incongruity of that statement with the many great Benedictine Monasteries whose main work is that of agriculture. Could this primary means of work amongst the Benedictines have persisted over the centuries if, in fact, it drew "a monk's attention away from God"?

Secondly, the aspect of "gardening" as a similar "distraction" cut to the core for me and rang the same bells of incongruity. St. Teresa of Avila often exhorted her nuns to always be returning to their spiritual origins, the first Carmelite hermits living on Mt. Carmel. (The word Carmel was often translated as "*the garden or vineyard of the Lord.*") In the Book of Her Life she describes the soul as a garden, and encourages her religious daughters to tend this inner garden with the water of prayer so it might blossom with the fruit and flowers of virtue. To this day, each Carmelite nun is assigned a garden to tend within the walls of the monastery, with the intention that this exterior experience will offer insight to the interior. This certainly testifies to the opposite of "drawing attention away from God."

St. Gertrude of Helfta, in *The Herald of Divine Love*, speaks of her experience of the garden thus:

"I went into the garden before Prime, and, sitting down beside the pool, I began to consider what a pleasant place it was. I was charmed by the clear water and flowing streams, the fresh green of the surrounding trees, the birds flying about, especially the doves. But most of all, I loved the quiet, hidden peace of this secluded retreat. I asked myself what more was needed to complete my happiness in a place that seemed to me so perfect, and I reflected that it was the presence of a friend, intimate, affectionate, wise and companionable to share my solitude. And then you, my God, (helped me see that if) I were to occupy myself with you alone, my heart would afford you a dwelling most suitably appointed from which no joy would be lacking."

Again, this is strong testimony of the garden leading one toward God rather than away from God.

St. John of the Cross, in his commentary on the 5th stanza of The Spiritual Canticle gives theological underpinning to the presence of God in and through creation rather than creation as a distraction from God - a wholistic rather than dualistic understanding:

"St. Paul says: *the Son of God is the splendor of His glory and the image of His substance* (Heb 1:3). It should be known that only with this figure, His Son, did God look at all things, that is, He communicated to them their natural being and many natural graces and gifts, and made them complete and perfect, as is said in Genesis: *God looked at all things that He made, and they were very good* (Gen.1:31). To look and behold that they were very good was to make them very good in the Word, His Son.

Not only by looking at them did He communicate natural being and graces, as we said, but also being. This He did when He became man and elevated human nature in the beauty of God and consequently all creatures, since in human nature He was united with them all.

Accordingly, the Son of God proclaimed: *If I be lifted up from the earth, I will elevate all things in me* (Jn 12:32). And in this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of His Son and through the glory of His resurrection according to the flesh, the Father did not merely beautify creatures partially, but rather we can say, clothed them wholly in beauty and dignity."

In my own life of solitude, I find myself drawn to God in many forms of nature, but especially in my garden and my tending of it. Always, I experience the prayer of adoration, praise, gratitude and unity. For me, the garden is an essential part of the contemplative and eremitical vocation, not a distraction from it.

Looking to the sayings of the Desert Fathers for guidance in our eremitical journey today sometimes requires reinterpretation in light of our current knowledge - often psychological. For example, workaholism is rampant in our society today and testifies to the fact that it is not necessarily the type of work one does but rather one's own compulsion regarding work, that may be the "distraction."

There where clinging to things ends, there God begins to be.

Meister Eckhart

zzzzzzz**Must Hermits Work? (A Continuation)**zzzzzzz

by Kenneth C. Russell

(Reprinted by permission from Review for Religious, March-April, 2000)

In St. Anthony's opinion, authentic solitaries do not live off their relatives or near them. On the contrary, they flee society and live outside civilization's jurisdiction in the wastelands beyond the fertile Nile valley. This withdrawal not only shelters them from the hubbub of village life, but makes farming impractical. Cassian regards farming as an unsuitable activity for a monk for several reasons. First, it draws the mind away from focus on God. Second, the fatigue bought on by hard field work drains away the energy a monk needs for his spiritual pursuits...

The third reason, however is the most important. Not only is farm labor hard, it is also periodic; as a consequence, a monk who does this work is at loose ends for long periods of time. Cassian noted some farming monks who grew restless whenever they visited the hermit colony of Skete. They literally could not sit still. Cassian says that they had not learned how to quiet their inner being because they worked outdoors and their thoughts were scattered everywhere by their bodily activity.

For John Cassian, therefore, work is primarily associated with the spiritual goal of the monk. The hermit works because work provides the best conditions for prayer. The monk does certain kinds of work because certain tasks can be done day and night, day in and day out, without undue fatigue and without requiring a great deal of attention. The uncomplicated procedures associated with rope making and the like help him to pray. They keep the monk alert and centered so that he is able to resist both sleep and the listlessness and distractedness typical of acedia.

The example of Abba Paul, who had no economic reason to do handwork, shows just how essential Cassian thought manual labor actually was. Abba Paul's needs were met by the garden he tended and the palm trees near by. It seems, in fact, that his idyllic little oasis was so far out in the desert that the hermit had no way of getting his wares to market. Nevertheless, he collected palm branches and set himself a daily quota of weaving.

Abba Paul did not work to feed himself or to provide for the poor. So what was the point of his manual labor? Cassian says that his example proves that a monk can neither stay put nor achieve perfection without manual labor. Abba Paul worked solely to purify his heart, to keep his thoughts on course, to persevere in his cell, and thus to overcome acedia. In other words, he worked because it steadied and grounded him. The handwork with which he occupied himself night and day while praying centered him in a way that the gardening he did to support his life could not.

Work serves prayer as long as it remains a subordinate element in the monastic regime. But, once a monk begins to think of himself as a "hard worker," he is in danger of feeding his human ambition by measuring his own worth in terms of the profit he makes or the tasks he performs. The monk, in effect, imports the world's notion of success into the desert. Once work itself becomes the goal, it usurps the priority that belongs properly to prayer.

This is vividly illustrated in Cassian's tale of an elder who comes upon one of these superachievers wearing himself out trying to break up a stubborn boulder. The exhausted monk thinks he is going a "good work", but the senior monk sees that a demon is urging him on. The point is clear: work that does not serve prayer can turn even the sorry resources of the desert into vehicles of human ambition.

(To be Continued)

Topic for August 2001 Issue:
"Who are the people who most influenced your choice of an eremitical vocation?"
Deadline: July 1, 2001

Resources Available from *Raven's Bread*

Readings in Spirituality - Annotated Bibliography by Sharon Jeanne Smith **31pp. \$10.00**

Solitude & Union: A Select Bibliography on the Hermit Way of Life by Cecilia W. Wilms **26pp. \$8.00**

Commentary on Canon 603 from "The Law of Consecrated Life" by Jean Beyer SJ, 1988 Translated from the French by W. Becker, 1992 **10pp. \$3.00**

Hermits: The Juridical Implications of Canon 603 by Helen L. Macdonald, Researcher Novalis: St. Paul University, Ottawa, ONT **24pp. \$8.00**

Notes to Guide the Beginning Hermit by A Hermit of Mercy **15pp. \$5.00**

Statutes for Hermits by The Bishops of France (1989) **12 pp. \$4.00**

Discernment Survey 1996 **6pp. \$2.00**

Fellowship of Solitairies

Comprised of and open to religious solitairies of all stripes. The Fellowship is ecumenical and has no official connections with any church. People may join the Fellowship either as Members or as Associates. All receive a regular Newsletter and a List of Members, so that they may be prayerfully aware of each other in their different paths and to make contact with each other if they so wish.

Correspondent: Eve Baker, Coed Glas, Talgarth Road, Bronllys, Brecon, Powys, LD3 0HN

To email Fellowship of Solitairies directly click on this link: fos@btinternet.com

To access the website of Fellowship of Solitairies click on this link: <http://www.btinternet.com/~benedict.baker>

Raven's Rest

The Silence...The Solitude...The Solace of God...

Retreatants welcome to schedule time (until November 16, 2001) at **Raven's Rest** Hermitage (a fully furnished apartment with kitchenette & private entrance) here at **Still Wood**. Offers opportunity to experience solitude and silence on a forested mountainside of the Newfound Range in the rural Smokies, approximately 35 miles N.E. of the Great Smokies National Park and 35 miles N.W. of Asheville. Spiritual Direction available upon request. Suggested offering \$20.00 per day includes meals. For further information, contact:

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BOOK NOTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First Person Singluar - Mountain Women in Solitude by Mary Freiburger. *A fascinating collection of responses to a letter written by the author to 25 women who have discovered that solitude is integral to their living "fully alive."* 2000. Paper 40 pp. \$7.95 (includes postage). Self-published by the author and available directly from her at P.O. Box 875, Cedar Glen, CA 92321-0875.

Lectio Divina, Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures by M. Basil Pennington. *An easy-to-read description of how to open up the riches of Scripture through prayerful reading as monks have done for centuries. Includes chapters on group sharing and even how to use cyberspace to enrich and share our experience.* 1998. Hard Cover. 164 pp. \$19.95. The Crossroad Publishing Company, 370 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

A Retreat with Desert Mystics, Thirsting for the Reign of God by Linus Mundy. *A seven-day retreat experience with your directors, the mothers and fathers of the desert, who challenge you to confront your God and yourself fiercely and fully.* 2000. Paper. \$8.95 St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1615 Republic Street, Cincinnati, OH 45210. Tel: 1-800-488-0488.

Zen & The Kingdom of Heaven, Reflections on the Tradition of Meditation in Christianity and Zen Buddhism by Tom Chetwynd. *An account of discovering through encounters with Zen Buddhism the rich Christian tradition of pure comtemplative prayer. Chetwynd explores the surprisingly Zen-like teachings of the Desert Fathers and other Christian meditation masters.* 2001. Paper 176 pp. \$16.95 Wisdom Publications, 199 Elm Street, Somerville, MA 02144. Tel: 1-800-272-4050.



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