

Recovering Lost Traditions in Spirituality: Franciscans, Camaldolese and the Hermitage

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The pungent fragrance of wild anise on a hot, windy day along California's Big Sur; the surf of the Pacific throwing up salty spray along the cliff-face; and, high above, an odd assortment of monks and friars laughing while strolling along paths under redwoods and live oaks. What is this? Odd as it may seem, it is the revival of an ancient friendship, one that is helping in the recovery of a nearly extinct form of spiritual practice.

A question is being posed there: how do we go about reviving a "lost" tradition of Christian spiritual practice? What happens when a community rediscovers, through work on its founding texts, an important dimension of its early life that has not survived into the present? Is it possible to bring that tradition to life again, not as a museum piece, but as a living, contemporary expression of a spiritual heritage? This set of questions underlies current efforts to reestablish the hermitage as a contemplative form of life among Franciscan religious men in the United States, and their partnership in this effort with Camaldolese monks. These efforts may speak to a more general challenge we face in the study and practice of ancient Christian spiritual disciplines: how can we reconnect to a spiritual tradition that has not been recently practiced?

POSING THE PROBLEM: RECOVERING A LOST TRADITION

Taking the Franciscans as an example of this broader issue, I would like to suggest a path toward recovery of a lost tradition. The process includes several steps, at least as I have observed it in action recently. I will sketch these steps below, in the form of a report on work in progress; others, undoubtedly, will be able to suggest other steps that should be included. These steps are: first, work on founding texts of the tradition. In this light, I will offer a brief description of early Franciscan texts regarding the form of life in hermitages. Second, an analysis of the causes that brought about the tradition's decline. Here I will point to both internal and external factors leading to loss of the Franciscan tradition of hermitages. Finally, the gathering of a community dedicated to its retrieval. Here I will describe a newly discovered partnership between a group of Franciscans and Camaldolese monks committed to sharing their appreciation for the eremitical form of life.

WORK ON FOUNDING TEXTS

An accurate description is needed of tradition as it existed in the past, gained through careful reading of foundational texts of the tradition. Not surprisingly, the often slow work in this first step bears fruit only later. This work received a special impetus from the call of the Second Vatican Council for Roman Catholic religious communities to return to their “founding charism.” This mandate posed a distinct problem to Franciscans. A careful reading of early texts of the tradition points to the importance of a structure for contemplative practice that had disappeared: the hermitage. It remains inextricable from the fabric of the early traditions of Franciscan spirituality; and a “return to the sources” of the tradition posed the challenge: how to create a bridge to an earlier tradition whose connections to the present exists almost exclusively in texts, without living practice and experience of its reality?

Evidence from the Texts: Francis of Assisi and the Hermitage

In the earliest texts of the tradition (ca. 1220-44), every early Franciscan settlement is described as *locus* (place) or *eremus* (meaning both “wilderness” and “hermitage”), the two terms being used interchangeably. Located in Umbria and Tuscany, many of these sites can still be visited today: Greccio, Fonte Colombo, the Porziuncola, and the mountain of La Verna, among others. In the writings of Francis of Assisi we find a brief set of instruction for his brothers who “wish to live religiously in a hermitage” (also called “A Rule for Hermitages”).¹ In this text Francis prescribes the ordinary daily routine for a small group of brothers (“three or four”) in these places. It contains a simple schedule for recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours at various times during the day and night, with a brief reminder about the practice of silence (from Compline after sunset until Terce at midmorning). It also indicates a flexible set of roles: some do the day-to-day work while others are free to dedicate themselves entirely to prayer. They exchange roles when it seems best to them. The roles are identified as those of “Martha and Mary” or “mothers and sons.” The text calls for an enclosure to separate the hermitage from visitors, ensuring a degree of solitude for the small group of brothers staying there.

As scholars have worked on other texts (accounts of daily life with Francis from his early companions), they have begun to note how frequently Francis and his companions are described as being in a hermitage to observe a “Lent” (*quadragesima*: a period of forty days). They spent such times in solitude and prayer “in the wilderness” (*in eremo*), inspired by their reading of Gospel accounts of Jesus who withdraws to a solitary place to pray. In the “Rule of the Lesser Brothers,” developed by Francis and his brothers, and approved by Pope Honorius III in 1223, two of these “Lents” are to be observed by all the brothers: one from All Saints’ Day to Christmas, and the other, “the Great

Lent,” from Ash Wednesday until Easter. A third Lent is recommended but not mandated: that “consecrated by the Lord’s fast” in the wilderness, beginning after the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (celebrated on January 6) and continuing until Ash Wednesday.

If, as seems likely, these “Lents” were normally observed in hermitages, there would already be some 120 days of the year spent in the kind of contemplative rhythm described in Francis’s brief instructions. We also know that Francis and some of the brothers observed two other “Lents,” at least in some years: the Lent from the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul (June 29), until the Feast of the Assumption (August 15), and the “Lent in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Michael the Archangel,” from August 15 to September 29. If all five of these “Lents” of more or less forty days were observed in a year, nearly two-thirds of it would be spent in fasting and prayer, quite likely in the hermitages.

The preaching, day-labor, and peace-making missions of the brothers, also attested in the texts, would thus have a hermitage not far away on the horizon, geographically and psychologically. Their year moved from the pole of engagement to the pole of contemplation, traveling from one “place” or hermitage to another. This movement may also have marked their everyday life, observed by Bishop Jacques de Vitry in 1216: “During the day they go into the cities and villages giving themselves over to the active life in order to gain others; at night, however, they return to their hermitage or solitary places to devote themselves to contemplation.”² This view of the origins of the Franciscan life would suggest that a “return to the charism of the founder,” as urged by the Second Vatican Council, should consider the role of the hermitage today.

If the practice of the eremitical life plays such an important role in the founding texts of the tradition, how is it that the practice has disappeared over the intervening centuries? Internally, the hermitage came to be associated with dissent and division among Franciscans from an early date, and was effectively suppressed over a century ago because of external social and political pressures.

CAUSES OF DECLINE

Analysis of these causes has been enriched greatly by two major studies. Duncan Nimmo’s work, *Reform and Division in the Franciscan Order*,³ gives an excellent overview of the problem, as does the more recent work by David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*.⁴ In either account, one can find how, in the later 13th century, the Franciscan hermitages, populated by friars committed to a contemplative life with a strict view of poverty, became the symbol of resistance to the friars’ move toward expanded pastoral ministry in the churches of large urban centers. The popularity of the apocalyptic vision of Abbot Joachim of Fiore among some prominent friars living in the hermitages (“the Spirituals”) led some into political dissent against the papacy and charges

of heresy (some of the main protagonists appear as characters in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*).

Internal Division

Since the condemnation of these "Spirituals" under Pope John XXII, in the early 14th century, the call to a return to the life of the hermitage has usually met with resistance from within the Franciscan Order, and such a return has been achieved only through the establishment of a new "minority" body with full or partial autonomy from the "majority," creating that system of "reform and division" that gives the title to Nimmo's work.

In the late 14th and 15th century the Friars Minor of the Observant reform championed this cause, leading to their division from the Friars Minor Conventual. By the early 1500s "Friars of the Eremitical Life" (the early name of the Friars Minor Capuchin) under the protection of Camaldolese monks, renewed this call, and separated from the Observants. In Spain and Italy, France and Germany from the 16th through the 18th centuries, new initiatives reshaped the Franciscan hermitage with names like "house of recollection," *retiro* or *sacer recessus*, each renewal movement eventually achieving some form of autonomy. This dynamic of reform and division might have kept the eremitical tradition alive, were it not for developments external to the Franciscan movement that effectively led to its disappearance.

External Suppression

Beginning with the French Revolution, government suppression of religious communities targeted particularly contemplative ones (defined by Liberal governments as "parasites" without a "useful" social function). From the late 1770s through the 1800s, in Austria, Germany, Spain, Italy and elsewhere, religious communities were disbanded or placed under strict government controls, regulating their productive contributions to society. Like other religious houses, the Franciscan *retiros*, "houses of recollection" and hermitages were suppressed, the property confiscated and sold.

At the end of the 19th century, as Franciscan groups slowly reassembled in the wake of these suppressions, the hermitages were for many only a memory. In the U.S., the Friars Minor, whether Observants, Capuchins or Conventuals, came as missionaries to serve the needs of Catholic immigrants in the country. If the Franciscan hermitages were already largely forgotten in Europe, it should not surprise us that Franciscan pioneers in these lands did not make efforts to establish them on American soil. The rocky history of attempts to found contemplative communities in the U.S. church of the 18th and 19th centuries (the Poor Clares are one example) would hardly have encouraged the friars to believe hermitages would have been well received if someone had thought of

establishing them here. Their efforts, like those of other U.S. Catholics from the 1850s through 1950s, were focused on building and staffing parishes, schools, orphanages and seminaries.

It was in the 1960s, with the call of the Second Vatican Council for a return to “the charism of the founder,” that Franciscans focused more attention on their early documents, the writings of Francis and the recollections of the earliest members of his movement. With that renewed attention came the “memory” of the early hermitages. For Franciscans today this renewal of memory has called into question a form of life, in which “the works of the apostolate” became, in the U.S. and elsewhere, the nearly exclusive *raison d’être* of the Order, while the contemplative dimension of the Franciscan form of life was ascribed principally to the women of the Poor Clare communities. To reappropriate the strong eremitical character of Francis and his brothers would challenge the basic identity of many Franciscan groups, and would meet with the inevitable resistances of an ecclesial and societal culture built on action and efficiency.

In the three decades since the Council’s call for renewal, attempts have been made to establish forms of eremitical practice among various Franciscan groups. A survey of some recent initiatives can be found in André Cirino, OFM and Josef Raischl, eds., *Franciscan Solitude*.⁵ Here one can find Franciscans of all sorts, lay and religious, men and women, friars, Poor Clares, husbands and wives, attempting to reclaim a contemplative tradition enshrined in the instructions Francis wrote for the hermitages. And those attempts are now finding a new source of encouragement from the interest and support of a monastic community with a long history of eremitical life and a centuries-old bond with the Franciscan life.

GATHERING A COMMUNITY DEDICATED TO RETRIEVAL: A CAMALDOLESE-FRANCISCAN DIALOGUE

I mentioned at the start the importance of gathering a community committed to a lost tradition’s retrieval. A point of reference for that community, in our Franciscan example, has been found in a series of dialogues with Camaldolese monks. The combination of Franciscan and Camaldolese may seem an unlikely one at first glance, but in fact the two share a long and rich history, and remarks on geography and history may help to illustrate the 800-year connections between the two communities.

The most famous early Franciscan hermitage is probably that of the Mountain of La Verna. In 1213, according to testimony from his family members, Count Orlando de’ Chiusi donated, to “Brother Francis and his companions and to the brothers both present and future, the mountain of La Verna,” near Arezzo in Tuscany. It was to this hermitage that Francis withdrew

two years before his death, to spend a forty-day “Lent” in late August and September of 1224. And there, according to his companion and secretary, Brother Leo, Francis received the vision of a Seraph and the stigmata revealed at the time of his death. Over the centuries La Verna has seen repeated revivals of its original, eremitical character, despite its fame as a place of pilgrimage and, more recently, a tourist destination.

In the same range of mountains, some twenty miles away in line of flight, lies the “sacred hermitage,” the *Sacro Eremo* of Camaldoli, where followers of St. Romuald continue a contemplative tradition begun there shortly after 1000. The persistent tradition identifying a “cell of St. Francis” at Camaldoli testifies to a long-held belief that Francis had spent time among the Camaldolese in the hermitage. And there are a few indications in Francis’s life and writings of possible contact between early Franciscans and their Camaldolese neighbors.

What we know of the physical layout of early Franciscan hermitages (for example, the Porziuncola near Assisi) resembles the type of *lavra* style used at the *Sacro Eremo* of Camaldoli: individual cells or huts separated from each other, clustered around a church or oratory in a kind of monastic village. That is, the style is not that of a *coenobium* with a common dormitory or even individual cells within one building, but something more reminiscent of the separate “cells” described in some of the early Egyptian monastic settlements.

In his instructions on life in the hermitages Francis inserts an interesting prohibition: each brother should have a cell in which to sleep and pray but should not eat in it. Perhaps this is an indication of a difference from the custom of the hermitage at Camaldoli, where the hermits ate in their separate cells. This may offer some indication that Francis was aware of specific difference between the Franciscan and Camaldolese forms of life in the hermitage, which could indicate his knowledge of the similarities as well.

Reviving the Franciscan-Camaldolese Connection

After the death of Francis, the interest and support of the Camaldolese have appeared at other important moments of Franciscan history, notably in their help to the early Capuchin reformers as they revived an eremitical form of life. Recently those ancient ties have been reinforced, as Franciscans have again begun exploring their own tradition of the hermitages.

The promptings for the current series of dialogues came from different quarters. Many Franciscans had spent time at the Hermitage of “New Camaldoli” in Big Sur, California in the years since its founding in 1958, seeking a space for solitude and silence. In the mid-1980s, Louis Vitale, Western U.S. Franciscan Provincial and Bruno Barnhart, *OSB Cam.*, then Prior of New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, California, had discussed the possibil-

ity of a Franciscan hermitage at New Camaldoli. Two members of the Camaldolese community, Dan Manger and Arthur Poulin, had been members of Franciscan communities before transferring their religious profession to the Camaldolese. The former Prior at Big Sur, Robert Hale, had once commented to me on the number of Franciscans who came to the hermitage, sometimes for long periods, in order to live the eremitical dimension of their own Franciscan vocation. Clearly there was some symbiosis between the Franciscan and Camaldolese communities, but its basis remained inarticulate.

As these conversations were taking place in California, Franciscan Friars and friends from St. Bonaventure University in western New York, led by Dan Riley, *OFM*, embarked upon the founding of a hermitage, inspired both by Francis and by Thomas Merton, a former teacher at St. Bonaventure's (1940-41). The hermitage was named Mt. Irenaeus, honoring the memory of Fr. Irenaeus Herscher, *OFM*, University librarian and friend of Thomas Merton during Merton's teaching days there. Merton was later to write a foundational essay on "Franciscan Eremiticism" as he was exploring his own eremitical vocation.⁶ Students, Franciscan Sisters, friends, and friars began to shape the life of this Franciscan "mountain retreat" or "spiritual refuge" as a place of encounter for students from the University, an ongoing environmental laboratory, and a place for reflection on the meaning of "contemplation in a world of action," inspired by Merton's writings.

Beginnings of a Dialogue

Dan Riley of the Mt. Irenaeus community had been a frequent visitor to the hermitage of New Camaldoli and, after conversations between the Mt. Irenaeus community and that of New Camaldoli, he and Dan Manger spearheaded a first encounter between their two communities. During the 2000 spring break, Dan brought a group from Mt. Irenaeus for a week of retreat and discussion at Big Sur: Lou McCormick, *OFM*; Agnes Brush; Anne Wachter, *OSF*; Frank Keery, a Mt. Irenaeus trustee; and two St. Bonaventure University students, Katie Maltzan, and Mike Britt. Participants from both the Mt. Irenaeus group and the Camaldolese community appreciated the exchange of experience and reflection and saw the potential for further exploration of their common contemplative vocation.

From the Camaldolese perspective, Dan Manger commented, "Our Order considers this an historic engagement with the Franciscans, one which we would very much like to pursue and continue." He also noted that the cooperative witness of the two communities is a vital contribution to church polity at this juncture. This could be a vital grace for future renewal and filled with possibilities as yet un-thought of. Providing a container for the dialogue and encounter is vital to the expression of hospitality given the Spirit and its holy operation. Further, this encounter holds healing and restorative resonances that



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then emerge in the contemplative grace that complements charity, preaching, wisdom oriented living, and teaching and environmental concerns. Franciscan Lou McCormick remarked, “The time spent with the Camaldolese community was a very rich experience, one which confirms my own idea of the contemplative dimension of the Franciscan life.” In fact it soon became apparent that members of both communities wished to see a continuation of this Franciscan-Camaldolese dialogue.

During this period a group of Franciscan women contemplatives were planning a visit to the Big Sur Hermitage. In 2001, at the conclusion of a Formation Workshop held in Santa Barbara and San Miguel, California, organized by Sr. Beth Lynn, OSC, of the Minneapolis Poor Clare community, thirty Poor Clare abbesses and formation personnel from the U.S. and Central America made the trip up to the hermitage for a Labor Day visit with the Camaldolese community, establishing another bond between the two traditions. This visit vividly symbolized the continuation of a living Franciscan contemplative tradition, that of the women whose communities trace their origins to Clare of Assisi.

The most recent event in this ongoing series occurred in early September of 2002. Friars from all three branches of the Order (Paul Galowski, of the Friars Minor Conventual, Bob Barbato and Mark Mance of the Friars Minor Capuchin and Louie Vitale, Keith Warner, Mateo Guerrero, Rufino Zaragoza and me, of the Friars Minor) joined members of the Big Sur community for several days of prayer, silence, and dialogue. We shared stories of our personal journey toward more contemplative forms of living, with some historical and psychological elements mixed in. We also took time for meals together, walks up in the hills and much laughter. (I can well imagine here a rather jolly-looking Merton beaming approvingly upon such an event.) Those participating made an agreement to meet again in 2003 to keep this conversation alive. The monks of Big Sur are also considering establishing an archive to house recordings and written materials from these events.

CONCLUSION

The dialogues in Big Sur are only another step in this ongoing work of reviving a tradition of eremitical life today in a community that had gradually lost that tradition. These fruitful conversations build upon the earlier careful study of the founding texts of the tradition, and the understanding of causes that led to the decline of the Franciscan hermitages.

The work in this time of gathering a community dedicated to recovery of a tradition is both important and simple: to develop friendships among brothers and sisters who have some contemplative experience, and who are interested in sharing that experience with each other. The cooperative witness of two communities is in itself already an important sign within the Church at this juncture. This witness may contain the promise of grace for future renewal, filled with unimagined possibilities for both sides.

Behind the scenes, Thomas Merton may well be the jovial patron of this enterprise. I recall his descriptions of Carthusians and Camaldolese in *The Silent Life*, and can now appreciate how much those descriptions were also the expressions of a deep longing he felt for a revival of the “lost tradition” of

eremitical life within Cistercian communities. Like him, Franciscans have come to be disturbed by a “dangerous memory” of our own eremitical tradition, one on which he wrote eloquently. This journey of Camaldolese-Franciscan dialogue, linking his former home in upstate New York to the California coast he admired, may well be part of his legacy.

NOTES

1. Regis Armstrong, Wayne Hellmann, William Short, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents I: “The Saint”* (Hyde Park NY: New City Press, 1999), 61-62.
2. Armstrong/Short, *Francis of Assisi*, 579.
3. Duncan Nimmo, *Reform and Division in the Franciscan Order* (Rome: Capuchin Historical Institute, 1987).
4. David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 2001).
5. André Cirino, OFM and Josef Raischl, eds., *Franciscan Solitude* (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1995).
6. *The Cord*, Dec. 1966, reprinted in Vol. 50:1 (2000), 23-29; also in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (NY: Doubleday and Co., 1971).