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COVER AND ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

The December cover, drawn by Father Francis X. Miles, O.F.M., emphasizes Christ, the Light of the World, as the center of the Franciscan's life in particular. At left, the craggy rock of Mount La Verna symbolizes the spirit of contemplation which must characterize the Franciscan even as he enters the heart of the modern world (symbolized at right) to serve it and win it for Christ. The illustration opposite p. 356 was done by Brother Berard, O.F.M. Conv., that on p. 367 by Father Francis X. Miles, O.F.M., those on pp. 368-69 by Sister Marie Monica, O.S.F., and those on pp. 375 and 383 by Sister M. Violanta, S.S.J.



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Franciscan Eremitism

Thomas Merton

I.

Saint Francis' love of solitude, intimately related to his conception of a poor and wandering life, can easily be treated as so much romantic trimming, something to be admired but not imitated, like preaching to the birds. But eremitical solitude is more than mere ornament in Franciscan spirituality. The spirit of solitary adoration, in the midst of nature and close to God, is closely related to the Franciscan concept of poverty, prayer and the apostolate. At the present moment, when there is a revival of eremitism in the monastic Orders, it might be interesting to consider Franciscan hermits in their historical per-

spective. To do this, we have to understand the very important pre-Franciscan movement of itinerant and preaching hermits in the 10th to 12th centuries.¹

Traditionally, eremitism in the west was closely related to the monastic Orders. The *Rule of Saint Benedict*² provided that after a long period of probation in the monastic community certain monks could retire into solitude for the sake of greater mortification, perfection and prayer. This solitude could be absolute or relative, and the pattern of life was usually worked out by the monk himself under the guidance of his Abbot. But in any case monastic eremitism at this time implied a further withdrawal from the so-

¹ G. G. Meersman, "Eremitismo e predicazione itinerante dei secoli XI e XII," in *L'Eremitismo in Occidente nei Secoli XI e XII*, Milan, 1965.

² *Rule of St. Benedict*, Ch. 1.

Thomas Merton, who certainly needs no introduction, here shares some important reflections with us, regarding the place of the contemplative life within Franciscanism.



ciety of men into a life entirely alone with God in contemplation. In a conception of the monastic life in which the community provided a mitigated solitude for the average man who could not go all the way into the desert, the step to eremitical solitude was considered higher because more perfectly and unequivocally "monastic" and world-denying. Many monks obtained permission to live as recluses, permanently enclosed in a cell in the monastery itself usually adjoining the Church, and at a certain period these monastic recluses formed a kind of spiritual and contemplative elite. We seldom find a really developed conception of any obligation to share with others the fruits of contemplation. True, the recluse was often consulted in spiritual matters by his brethren. But he was normally not in a position to preach and no one would have expected him to do so.

In the 10th century a new movement began which was for the most part independent of monasticism. Laypeople or secular clerics began to withdraw directly into solitude without passing through a period of monastic formation. Living in the woods and developing as best they could their own mode of life, they remained in rather close contact with the poor (that is, generally speaking, with their own class) with outlaws and outcasts and with the itinerants who were always numerous in the Middle Ages. Closely identified as the hermits were with the underprivileged, the oppressed and those for whom the official institutions of society showed little real concern, the non-monastic hermitage

quickly became a place of refuge for the desperately perplexed who sought guidance and hope — if not also a hiding place and physical safety. Thus the non-monastic hermit by the very fact of his isolation from the world became open to the world in a new and special way. Since in fact preaching had been practically abandoned in the parish churches and the monks did not preach to the people but only to themselves, there was an urgent need for the gospel message to be announced to the poor in simple language they could understand — the language of penance, conversion, salvation and love of the Savior. Consequently these lay hermits often became itinerant preachers and the movement of preaching hermits acquired a kind of charismatic aura in the 11th century. The name of Peter the Hermit, preacher of the first Crusade, is there to remind us of this fact. Many of these hermits had their preaching mission confirmed by the Popes themselves. Others were approved by bishops. Still others just "got up and went" and their words were well received. Some of these itinerant hermits thought of going to preach to the Saracens and even attempted to do so in the hope of being martyred. When they failed they returned to their solitude and to the 'martyrdom of contemplation.' The picture is a familiar one: we can see that the movement of itinerant hermits of the 10th to 12th centuries provided a background and a precedent for the eremitism of the first Franciscans.

It is true that by the 13th century the eremitical movement had

died out or been absorbed back into monasticism. The Cistercian laybrothers of the 12th century were largely recruited from among the kind of people who might otherwise have become itinerant hermits. The Cistercian laybrotherhood in the 12th century had something of an eremitical as well as a distinctly "lay" character: the brother was destined by vocation to live outside the monastic enclosure if necessary, on distant farms and granges or in crofts where he might be entirely alone for long periods. The simple life of the brother was very close to that of the lay hermit, and the brothers of Citeaux and other monastic reforms tended to replace the hermit movement.

Saint Francis, however, was in the direct line of the earlier hermit tradition.

II.

The First Rule of the Friars Minor, approved orally in 1209, does not specifically legislate for hermitages, but it mentions them in passing as taken for granted.³ "Let the brothers wherever they may be in hermitages or other places take heed not to make any place their own and maintain it against anybody else. And let whoever may approach them, whether friend or foe or thief or robber, be received kindly." Here we find not only the spirit we would expect from having read the lives and legends of Saint Francis but also the authentic tradition of the

earlier itinerant hermit movement which was non-monastic and completely open to the world of the poor and the outcast. It is taken for granted that the hermit will meet with thieves and robbers, and he must not place himself above them or separate himself from them but must show himself to be their brother. The hermit is not just the man who, like Saint Arsenius, has fled entirely from men. He is not just the man of deep contemplative recollection: he is the vulnerable, open and loving brother of everyone — like Charles de Foucauld in our own time. He is a "Little Brother of the Poor."

The special statute or instruction composed by Saint Francis for those retiring to hermitages is well known.⁴ A hermitage is in fact a small community of three or four brothers, some living entirely in silence and contemplative solitude with others who take care of their needs as their "Mothers." These "Mothers" must also see that their "children" are not disturbed by outsiders. But the contemplatives should also from time to time take over the active duties and give their "Mothers" a rest. It is a charming document which, however, does not give a very detailed picture of the life these hermits led.

The importance of the document lies in the spirit which it exhales — a spirit of simplicity and charity which pervades even the life of solitary contemplation. It has been observed that the

genius of sanctity is notable for the way in which it easily reconciles things that seem at first sight irreconcilable. Here Saint Francis has completely reconciled the life of solitary prayer with warm and open fraternal love. Instead of detailing the austerities and penances which the hermits must perform, the hours they must devote to prayer and so on, the Saint simply communicates the atmosphere of Love which is to form the ideal climate of prayer in the hermitage. The spirit of the eremitical life as seen by Saint Francis is therefore cleansed of any taint of selfishness and individualism. Solitude is surrounded by fraternal care and is therefore solidly established in the life of the Order and of the Church. It is not an individualistic exploit in which the hermit by the power of his own asceticism gains a right to isolation in an elevation above others. On the contrary, the hermit is reminded above all that he is dependent on the charity and the good will of others. This is certainly another and very effective way of guaranteeing the sincerity of the hermit's life of prayer since it shows him how much he owes it to others to become a true man of God.

Meanwhile, we shall presently see that Franciscan eremitism had another aspect: it was open to the world and oriented to the apostolic life.

Saint Francis founded at least twenty mountain hermitages and there is no need to remind the reader what outstanding impor-

tance his own solitary retreat at Mount Alverna played in his life. He received the stigmata there in 1224. Franciscan mysticism is centered upon this solitary vision of the Crucified, and the love generated in this solitude is poured out on the world in preaching.

Blessed Giles of Assisi was essentially an itinerant hermit. On his return from the Holy Land in 1215 he was assigned in obedience to a hermitage by Saint Francis. In 1219 he went to Tunis vainly seeking martyrdom. From 1219 to about 1225 he lived at the Carceri in a small chapel surrounded by other caves. It is interesting that the Carceri which had once been used by Benedictine hermits became after Mount Alverna the symbol of Franciscan solitude. It is thought that Saint Francis wrote part of the Rule there. The mysticism of Blessed Giles developed in the hermitage of Cetona, and he also founded other hermitages himself.⁵

With Blessed Giles we also find another emphasis. The hermitage is the stronghold of the pure Franciscan spirit, the primitive ideal of the Holy Founder, threatened by others too preoccupied, as some thought, with power and prestige. In the struggle to preserve the primitive spirit of poverty and utter Franciscan simplicity, the hermitages played the part that may be imagined. It is interesting, incidentally, that when Saint Bonaventure was made Cardinal he received the news while he was washing dishes in a hermitage.

⁵ For Bl. Giles see Raphael Brown, *Franciscan Mystic, Giles of Assisi*, New York, 1961.

³ First Rule of St. Francis, Ch. 7.

⁴ See *Mirror of Perfection*, 65, quoted in *The Words of St. Francis*, an anthology compiled and arranged by James Meyer O.F.M., Chicago 1952, pp. 111-113.

III.

It is not hard to understand that in periods of reform the ideal of solitude has had an important part to play in renewal of the Franciscan life and apostolate. This is especially clear when we study Saint Leonard of Port Maurice and the Franciscan revival in Italy in the 18th century. Saint Leonard himself got his vocation while listening to the Friars chant compline in the *Ritiro* on the Palatine, and his promotion of the *Ritiro* movement is both characteristic and important in his life as a reformer.

The *Ritiro* movement⁶ went back perhaps to the 16th century. In addition to hermitages which always existed and provided solitude for Friars desiring a life of more intense prayer, specially fervent communities were formed to serve as models of observance. A *Ritiro* must not in fact be confused with a hermitage. It was simply a community of picked volunteers who elected to live the Rule in its perfection with special emphasis on poverty, cloister, prayer and all that could enhance the contemplative and ascetic side of the Franciscan life. However the *Ritiri* were not unconnected with the eremitical strain in the Order, and the first *Ritiro* founded by Blessed Bonaventure of Barcelona had developed out of a hermitage.

Saint Leonard of Port Maurice began by reforming a *Ritiro* (even a *Ritiro* could eventually need to be reformed!) when he became

Guardian of San Francesco al Monte in Florence. His emphasis here was not specifically on solitude and contemplation, but simply on the exact observance of the rules. The *Ritiri* were not originally centers of eremitical life: they were meant to be houses of model regularity and fervor. To promote greater solitude, Saint Leonard of Port Maurice created the *Solitudine*.⁷ The purpose of this more frankly eremitical type of community was the life of pure contemplation.

St. Leonard described his purpose in these words:

By complete separation from the world to become able to give oneself to pure contemplation and then after the acquisition of greater fervor to return into the communities to apply oneself more avidly to the salvation of one's neighbor.⁸

As always, in the Franciscan tradition, the idea of solitude is not self-sufficient. Solitude opens out to the world and bears fruit in preaching.

The character of the *Solitudine* instituted by Saint Leonard is that of the reforms of that time. The strictness and austerity remind one of De Rancé and La Trappe. The cells were so small that when standing in the middle one could touch the ceiling and the two sides. The discipline was taken daily in common for half an hour. Fasting continued all the year round. Perpetual silence was

observed, the Friars went barefoot. There were small hermitages attached to the convent, and to these one might retire for greater solitude and more prayer.

This rigorous and solitary life was not intended to be permanent. Most of the five retreatants in the community were men who were there for two months only. However, Friars could remain in the *Solitudine* for longer periods and even for years. Besides the retreatants, there was a Superior (Presidente) with a gatekeeper and a cook (the latter a Tertiary). There were also cells for religious of other Orders who might want to come there to renew their fervor.

There is an obvious resemblance between the *Solitudine* and the Carmelite "Desert." It is a place of temporary eremitical retreat to which one withdraws in order to renew the spirit of prayer and fervor and from which one returns to the work of preaching with a more perfect charity and a message of more convincing hope. The emphasis is on the fact that in solitary prayer and meditation one gets deeper into the root of things, comes to see himself more clearly as he is in the eyes of God, realizes more perfectly the real nature of his need of grace and for the Holy Spirit and comes to a more ardent love of Jesus crucified. With all this one is normally opened to the world of other men and made ready for the more complete gift of himself to the work of saving souls.

However, both the *Ritiri* and the *Solitudini* came under very heavy criticism. First they seemed to create a division within the Order.

Second it could be asked whether their spirit was too formal and rigorous to be called authentically Franciscan. It is certainly true that the rather forbidding austerity of the *Solitudine* might be considered a little alien to the primitive Franciscan spirit of simplicity and evangelical freedom. The severe regulations contrast with the warm and tender spirit of Saint Francis' statute for hermits. But the solitary convents evidently had the effect that Saint Leonard desired, and the preaching of the Saint when he emerged from his solitude was said to be characterized by a great tenderness which, instead of frightening sinners, encouraged and strengthened them.

IV.

This very brief outline suggests a few conclusions. The eremitical spirit has always had a place in the Franciscan life, but it is not the spirit of monasticism or of total, definitive separation from the world. The eremitism of Saint Francis and his followers is deeply evangelical and remains always open to the world, while recognizing the need to maintain a certain distance and perspective, a freedom that keeps one from being submerged in active cares and devoured by the claims of exhausting work.

In all forms of the religious life we are asking ourselves, today, whether the accepted methods of renewing our fervor are quite adequate to present day needs. Certainly the prescribed eight day retreat has its value. But the new generation is asking itself serious-

⁶ Angelo Cresi O.F.M., "S. Leonardo di Porto Maurizio ed i conventi di Ritiro," *Studi Francescani*, XLIX, 1952, p. 154 ff.

⁷ Angelo Cresi O.F.M., "S. Leonardo di Porto Maurizio e l'Incontro," *Studi Francescani*, vol. cit., pp. 176 ff.

⁸ Quoted, *Studi Francescani*, vol. cit., p. 168.

ly whether this rather formalistic exercise really produces any lasting fruit. Is it simply a tightening of nuts and bolts on machinery which is obsolete? Modern religious who feel the need of silence generally seek it not merely for the purpose of self-scrutiny and ascetic castigation, but in order to recuperate spiritual powers which may have been gravely damaged by the noise and rush of a pressurized existence. This silence is not necessarily tight-lipped and absolute — the silence of men pacing the garden with puckered brows ignoring each other — but the tranquility of necessary leisure in which religious can relax in the peace of a friendly and restful solitude and once again become themselves. Today more than ever we need to recognize that the gift of solitude is not ordered to the acquisition of strange contemplative powers, but first of all to the recovery of one's deep self, and to the renewal of an authenticity which is twisted out of shape by the pretentious routines of a disordered togetherness. What the world asks of the priest today is that he should be first of all a person who can give himself because he has a self to give. And indeed, we cannot give Christ if we have not found him, and we cannot find him if we cannot find ourselves.

These considerations may be useful to those whose imaginations and hopes are still able to be stirred by the thought of solitude, and of its important place in every form of the religious and apostolic life, in every age, especially our own.

PAUL, TRUMPET OF THE SPIRIT

Compiled by

Sister Emily Joseph, C.S.J.

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This remarkable collection of essays on the words, the work, the personality of the Apostle of the Gentiles was selected to give a three dimensional picture of him. Cardinals Newman and Doepfner, Elizabeth Bowen, Monsignor Knox, Daniel-Rops, are but a few of the authors headed by St. John Chrysostom who share in this glowing, stirring anthology. Frontespiece. \$3.50

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