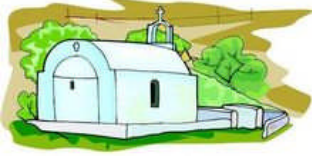


## A Franciscan Hermitage in the Australian Bush Wayne LBF



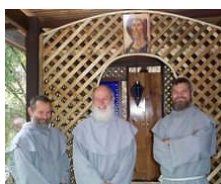
Brother Geoffrey, Brother Howard and I came to this little valley twenty years ago, in the rocky foothills of the Great Dividing Range on the east coast of Australia. The locals describe it as “rubbish country, where the country is so poor that even the wallabies have to take their picnic lunch”. We all came with considerable experience of the Religious Life as Franciscan Brothers; for me it had been twenty years.

Our early days were focused on creating a place where we could live and develop the lifestyle that we felt we were being called into. At the very beginning we experienced what it means to step out in faith. We had only enough money to put a deposit on the land - which we did - and had a month to pay the rest. Then Our Lord met us and provided for us in ways that we could not have foreseen. In his Rule for Hermitages Francis says, "Their first care should be to strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness." (Matt. 6: 24-34)

There was nothing on our land by way of fences or buildings; nothing but the bush and a creek. We began with a borrowed tent that leaked, followed by a borrowed caravan. Then in the next year we were able to erect a simple building in which to live. We slowly established the basics including our own individual hermitages and a rhythm of life. At this stage we began to revisit and explore the history of hermitages within the Franciscan tradition and in particular the role of hermitages in the life of Francis. We were struck by the fact that the Rule he wrote for hermitages reflected what we intuitively and by guidance had developed here.

Francis' concept for a hermitage was that it should not be large, nor was it to be a hermitage of just one hermit, but a genuine small fraternity of three or at the most four brothers living together.

One of the things we have experienced as a community of three is our total dependence on each other. Each Brother is essential and valued for his contribution, whether it is his skill in making jam and marmalade for sale; building; caring for the sheep and goats; or working in the apiary. The bonds between us are deepened and our love for each grows as we experience the good times, as well as bushfires and droughts, not only in physical reality, but also in our inner life and journey as individuals and together as Brothers.



In the Rule there is no appointed leader, there is rather, an ongoing interchange of roles between those who withdraw for solitude and prayer and those who serve, using the Gospel image of Martha and Mary. Here we see a very delicate balance of roles and functions which are put in place

to nurture the life of prayer of the fraternity and the individual. For us therefore, authority resides in the Life Professed of the fraternity: it is in the collective wisdom, spiritual maturity, graces and gifts of the Brothers who are responsible for the well-being of the individual and the community.

Days off and social times with laughter, and meals together with each other and friends are important. The number and frequency of visitors does however change the focus of the daily life. The occasional late night over an extended meal is fun, but it soon becomes obvious that it affects the next morning's silent hour of prayer at dawn.

It is for this reason that we have built our Guest Cottage to accommodate just one person. Other visitors not staying with us are asked to prearrange their visits and then we only invite one to three who join us for MIDDAY OFFICE and lunch, on Sundays.

Outside commitments needed to be seen in a similar light. As we become better known, we receive a growing number of invitations to attend important events in the lives of friends and in the church - weddings, birthdays, baptisms, ordinations, synods, funerals, inductions, etc. We decided that rather than being physically present, we would make time and space in our lives to pray for the particular event.

It is in the light of all this that we came to understand the section in the Rule on enclosure and those outside the community. Like the athlete, the writer, the warrior, or any other skilled person, we need to bring into both our individual and community lives a commitment to our primary task. Anyone who is serious about their particular craft or profession makes it their focus and priority. For us manual work, silence, community and times alone in our hermitages, and the Liturgy of the Hours, are central to our way of life.

In his Rule, Francis sets the rhythm of the Liturgy of the Hours as the focus for the prayer life of the hermitage. This is the natural cycle of each day when with psalms, hymns and scripture we refocus our attention and spend time with the One we love and who loves us. We have developed our own Office Book because of our need to have material which is both contemplative and Franciscan in the Offices. Praying, listening, and reflecting on the text of the Offices is an important source for renewing and deepening the charism within each one of us.

The time spent by Brothers in solitude is arranged among ourselves with one brother spending four months of the year apart in his hermitage with limited contact with others. There are different reasons for seeking solitude. There are those who seek solitude as a relief from their frenetic and busy lifestyles in the city with its crowds, noise, stress of the workplace and hectic social life. They seek times and places of solitude for rest and renewal. Then there are those who seek solitude in order to find someone, as Thomas Merton attests: "The great joy in the solitary life is not found simply in quiet in the beauty and peace of nature, or in the song of birds, or even in the peace of one's own heart. It resides in the awakening and the attuning of the inmost heart to the voice of God - to the inexplicable, quiet, definite inner certitude of one's call to

obey Him, to hear Him, to love Him, and worship Him here, now, today, in silence and alone. It is the realisation that this is the whole reason for one's existence."

A deep longing for God is central to our way of life, and in Christ we see the perfect expression of God's longing and love for us. We seek to deepen our relationship with God through prayer, manual work, community, and times of being alone in our hermitages. As a community of Brothers in our fragile human condition, we strive to live simply the Rule written by Saint Francis for "those who live in hermitages". *f*

*Wayne LBF has been a Franciscan brother for forty years, of which twenty have been spent at the Franciscan Hermitage of the Little Brothers of Francis, Eremophila, Tabulam, NSW 2469 Australia.*